FRIDAY - SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 27 - 29, 2009

WEEKEND JOURNAL.

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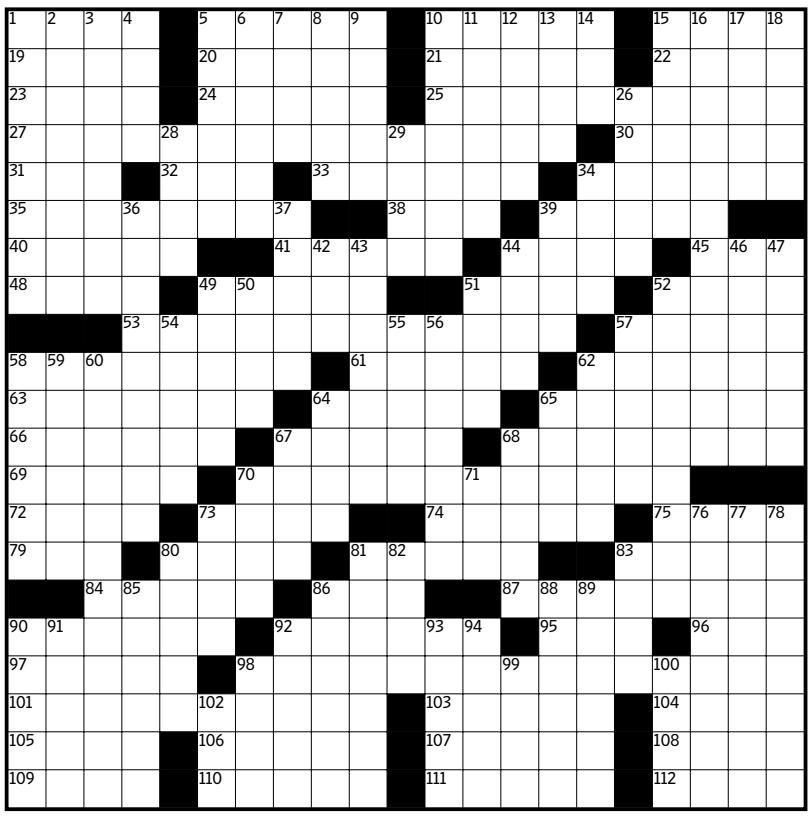
Unreal Estate / by Todd McClary



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Last week's solution

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The Hermès habit

This luxury label is always in vogue

By Christina Passariello

Artcurial

Clockwise from top: Clocks, pigskin vanity case, alligator Birkin, crocodile Kelly and a rare wastebasket; inset below, ashtray

At Paris auction house Artcurial's sale of vintage Hermès earlier this month, an assistant balanced a chocolate-brown crocodile Birkin bag on his white-gloved fingertips as he paraded it around the room.

Bidding opened at €15,000 (about $22,500), and two clients calling in by phone furiously one-upped each other. Within less than a minute, the price of the few-year-old bag had jumped to $37,150, shooting $7,430 past the high estimate and far above the bag's retail price.

The appetite for Hermès, vintage or new, has strongly resisted the slump in luxury spending during the economic crisis. The sale of 631 items—from bags and scarves to garden pruners and bridge sets—raked in $1.2 million, surpassing the $1.1 million sold at auction in May, a record.

Hermès is the only luxury fashion label to have entire auctions dedicated to it. While the company doesn't authorize any of the auctions, the two each year held by Artcurial, one of the city's best-known auctioneers, are considered the most prestigious.

Fetishists, socialites, collectors, students and tourists all flock to Artcurial's two day-long events.

The house of Hermès expects its sales to rise slightly this year amid an estimated 8% drop in global sales of luxury goods, according to consultancy Bain & Co. Sales in its core categories of bags, silks (scarves and ties) and apparel are still strong. That's particularly true for the company's signature leather bags—its Kelly and Birkin bags have provided a steady stream of revenue even in the midst of the economic slowdown.

Handmade in France, the two bags are longtime classics—the Kelly was baptized in the 1950s after Grace Kelly clutched it on the cover of Life magazine; the Birkin was created for singer Jane Birkin. Awareness of the bags exploded in the 1990s, the era of the "it" bag, but Hermès was only able to boost production as quickly as it could recruit and train craftsmen to make them, and years-long waiting lists resulted. Since the downturn, it has been easier at stores to find some Birkins and Kellys, which generally list for thousands of dollars, but waiting lists remain for particular colors or skins.

"These are objects with a soul, with a past. They're unique," said Artcurial's resident Hermès expert Cyril Pigot, ducking beneath a row of silk scarves hanging from the walls of the gallery. He theorizes that women want their Kelly bags looking broken-in during a slow economy so they don't seem as ostentatious. "It's much more chic to have a crocodile bag with a 20-year patina." Mr. Pigot, who sources items from wealthy families and estate sales, prices his items at about 50% to 60% off the original list price and hasn't lowered his estimates.

Vintage items from other houses such as Louis Vuitton, Goyard and Yves Saint Laurent are sold in themed auctions. Yves Saint Laurent's estate went on the block in February in what critics called "the sale of the century," but it was the deceased designer's art collection, not fashion items, that drew crowds.

Michael Tonello, the author of "Bringing Home the Birkin," who bought $1.6 million in Hermès merchandise in one year to resell, says Hermès "is not really seen as fashion—it's seen as an investment in your place in society."

At Luxury, a high-end secondhand shop in Zurich, Paris and online, Peter Nitz sells Hermès bags and scarves dating back to before World War II. While he can be picky as to which Chanel or Yves Saint Laurent he'll take, "for Hermès, we take everything," says Mr. Nitz. "Just the name Hermès on it means we can sell it." He sells rare-colored Birkin bags for up to 40% more than list price.

Hermès keeps its distance from the sale of its secondhand goods. But some employees attend to add to their personal collections. Hermès declined to comment for this article.

In the days before the recent auction, Artcurial's exhibition rooms overlooking Paris's luxury shopping boulevard Avenue Montaigne turned into an Hermès curiosity shop. Mr. Pigot arranged the hundreds of items in displays—bags hung from antlers, watches sat in glass cases, and a leather-trimmed bike was propped up casually against the wall.

Bags made up two-thirds of the collection. Those made in unusual colors or skins were popular. A potential buyer called in for a precise description of the colors on a crocodile Kelly bag, which sold for $22,740, a premium to its $13,375 to $14,860 estimate.

Many of the auction items were notable for their history. One of the plainer-looking scarves—burgundy spurs and other equestrian icons on a cream-colored background—was made from cotton, not silk. The scarf dates from World War II when silk was requisitioned for combat parachutes and Hermès briefly made its scarves in cotton, Mr. Pigot said. It sold for $420, near the upper end of its $300 to $445 estimate.

The old obscure items and custom trinkets particularly appeal to Hermès fanatics. There was a leather toiletries kit monogrammed "FF," a silverware picnic set in a red leather case and a tennis-racket-shaped silver clip to hold mail. "Look at the beauty of this," Mr. Pigot said, lifting a 1970s bridge kit in dark-green crocodile out of a glass case. "These objects were part of an art of living that has disappeared."

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Thoroughly modern jade

This Chinese perennial gem comes out of its traditional setting

By Alexandra A. Seno

Hong Kong

When Anita Lee got married a decade ago, her mother gave her a pair of green jade earrings. But they sat in a safe-deposit box for years.

The traditional jade earrings with a lot of gold "aren't really my style," says Ms. Lee, a 42-year-old Canadian-Chinese who used to live in Hong Kong but now resides in Tokyo. Drawn to jade because of the color and its versatility, Ms. Lee wanted to wear the jewelry, so she turned to a Hong Kong-based designer, Eugenia Lee, to refashion the gemstones into a more modern setting.

The term jade can refer to jadeite, the most precious type, or to the mineral nephrite, which is plentiful, readily accessible and therefore inexpensive. Dark green or "imperial green" is the most sought-after color of jadeite, and today the stone mainly comes from northern Myanmar.

Through the centuries, Chinese have treasured fine imperial jadeite above all other gems: Noble and wealthy households prized jadeite jewelry and objects, and artists immortalized the stone in poetry and paintings. Even through the current global economic downturn, demand for the gem has continued to soar among affluent Chinese. The Hong Kong Trade Development Council estimates that jadeite prices have risen 20% to 30% annually, on average, over the past few years. Today, a string of plain, polished round beads in the much-desired shade of green can command US$1 million.

And in a dramatic shift in tastes from the 1970s, when nearly all demand for jadeite was for traditional styles, jewelers estimate that now about 20% of pieces sold are contemporary designs.

Two years ago, Eugenia Lee, the jewelry designer, turned a longtime personal passion into her new career. A former banker, she set up custom jewelry-design brand Teufi. Now she's busy reworking jadeite belonging to clients in Hong Kong, many of whom have inherited pieces set in traditional styles. For instance, Ms. Lee (who isn't related to Anita Lee) reconfigured a pair of matronly, brown jadeite ear studs into a drop style for what she calls a "dramatic, sexy look."

"Traditional jadeite jewelry is very formal and perceived as outdated, to be worn only on special occasions such as weddings, to complement a cheongsam (a traditional high-necked, figure-hugging Chinese dress with a side-slit skirt)," Ms. Lee of Teufi says. "The current taste in jadeite jewelry not only is modern in form and design, but also is versatile in terms of its wearability."

Designer Dickson Yewn creates elaborately hand-crafted Chinese-history-inspired works that sell at international auctions. The Hong Kong designer contends that jadeite's value lies not only in its beauty and cultural significance, but also its rarity. "Every year, truckloads of diamonds are extracted from the ground, but not jadeite. The old jadeite mines are depleted, so the best stones are often old," Mr. Yewn says.

Because really good specimens of jadeite are difficult to come by, he doesn't often use the stone in his own designs. But private collectors frequently bring him jadeite and ask for one-of-a-kind creations. His more affordable retail collection, available at his eponymous Hong Kong boutique and at luxury outlets such as New York's Bergdorf Goodman, currently includes two dramatic rings (prices starting at US$9,900). They are made with diamonds and lower-grade jadeite, set in a white gold lattice that echos the cloud pattern found in Chinese architecture and furniture.

At Qeelin in Hong Kong, which aims to become the first international Chinese luxury jewelry house, some of designer Dennis Chan's best-selling pendants and rings incorporate black or light-colored jadeites, materials that he likes for their cultural nuance and texture.

Hanging off a simple silk cord, the focal point of one necklace is a large piece of jadeite adorned with a dragon in diamonds and inlaid white gold (HK$188,000 or about US$24,260). A deceptively simple squarish ring whose top is the gemstone sells for HK$22,800 (US$2,940).

While jadeite might remain the most Asian of gems, Western designs for the material are proving a hit among adventurous Chinese. "Our clients are still pursuing high-quality, vivid green, transparent or translucent jadeite," says Marguerite Sam, general merchandise manager for jewelry at upscale department store Lane Crawford in Hong Kong. "What has changed is the design of the pieces, steering away from the explicitly traditional or Oriental designs." Many European designers are "presenting jade designs in a more contemporary aesthetic," she adds.

Noting the trend for new-style jadeite accessories in the Chinese market, the luxury retailer, which also has stores in mainland China, collaborated with Paris-based designers Jean Grisoni and Taher Chemirik to produce an exclusive line. Lane Crawford sourced top-grade jadeite beads and cabochons in greens, pinks and blacks that the designers set in yellow gold. The most expensive item, a pendant, retails for

Clockwise from top left: Jade pendants by Qeelin come in a range of shades; the company's Tien Di dragon necklace features inlaid diamonds and gold; Teufi's brown jadeite earrings with 'Deco' and 'Fringe' accents; black and white jade rings by Qeelin; the 'Ruyi' lattice jadeite and diamond ring by Yewn.

Qeelin; Teufi; Yewn

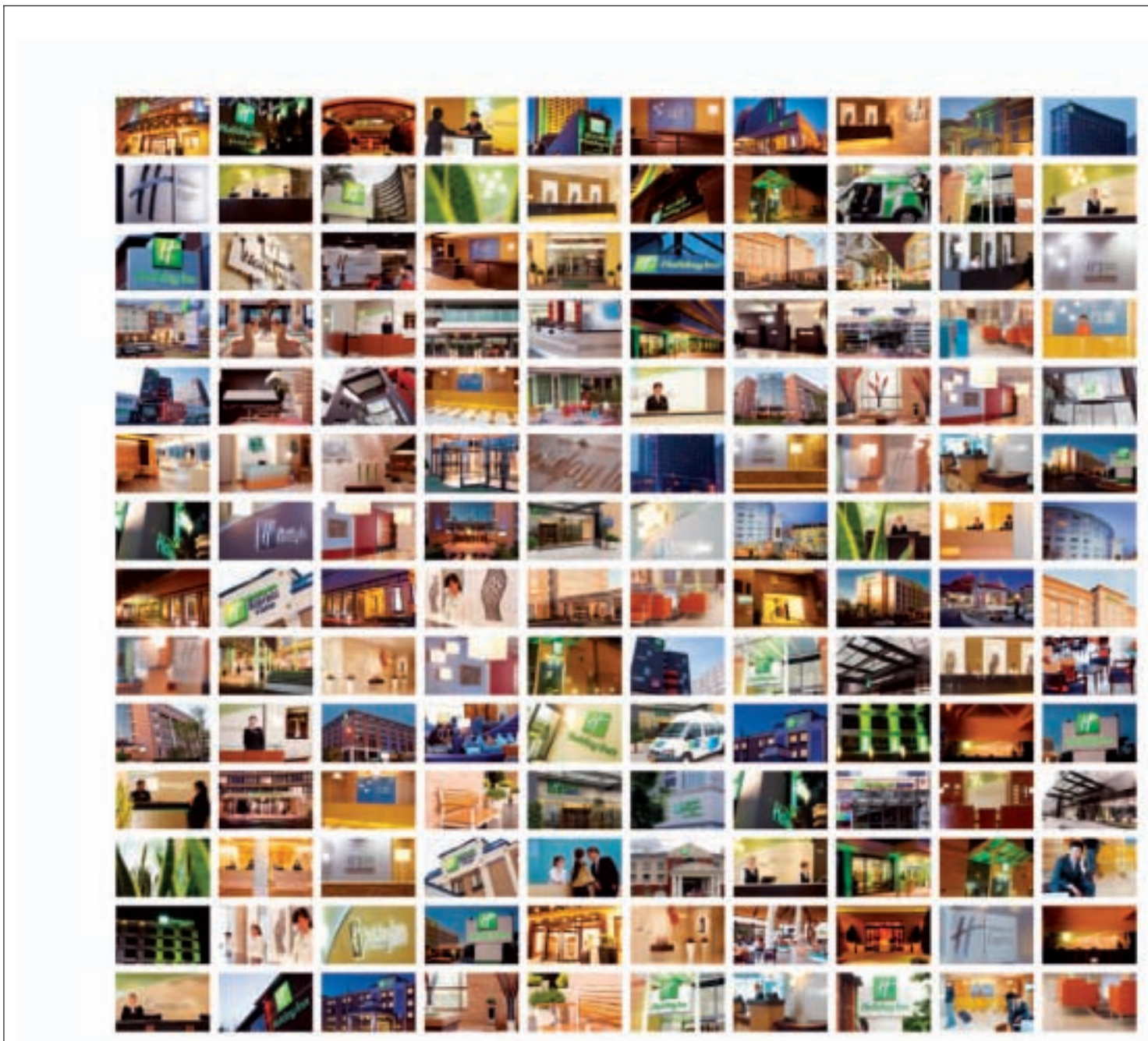
Far right, this jade lavaliere necklace, made in the 1960s, was given to a Teufi client as a gift when she got married. She wanted it reworked into something more stylish and requested the redesign use all 26 jade pieces. Teufi worked up sketches of three designs, right.

HK$10.8 million (about US$1.4 million).

Meanwhile, back in Tokyo, Anita Lee plans to commission Teufi to refashion pieces from a box full of jadeite that belonged to her mother, who lives in Vancouver. Once her mother saw the made-over green jadeite earrings, Ms. Lee says, she was in favor of resetting more pieces.

Wearing them will make "me feel closer to her," says Ms. Lee, who is expecting her second child soon. "I hope to also pass them on to my children when the time comes," she adds, and by making the pieces "more modern and wearable" she hopes "they, too, will come to love them."

Alexandra A. Seno is a Hong Kong-based writer.



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THE COLLECTOR:

Yonfan

A simple approach: 'I enjoy beautiful things'

By Alexandra A. Seno

Yonfan, best known these days as an art-house auteur, lives high above Hong Kong's Central business district. His penthouse apartment, with its roof deck, has breathtaking views of the skyline, and he has filled his genteel home with art, antique furniture and other beautiful objects.

"Everything here has a story," he says of the things in his Hong Kong house. So does he.

Yonfan was born in China's Hunan province in 1947, but grew up in Taiwan. As a teenager, he moved to Hong Kong, where for fun he went to movie sets and took photographs. He studied math at Oklahoma Baptist University in the U.S., then lived in Europe, where he became a fashion model, posed for Lord Snowdon (the photographer once married to Britain's Princess Margaret), rubbed elbows with American novelist and painter Henry Miller and British sculptor Henry Moore. An already-famous David Hockney sketched him in 1972.

In 1973, Yonfan returned to Hong Kong and embarked on successful careers as a film distributor and celebrity portrait photographer. A little more than a decade later, he was directing, writing and even acting in movies, and he quickly earned a reputation for finding fresh talent destined to become stars, including Maggie Cheung, Chow Yun-fat and Daniel Wu.

But in the 1990s, he turned his back on commercial cinema and began making independent art-house films that have drawn a little controversy—for sexually risqué content—as well as acclaim. His latest, "Prince of Tears," set in Taiwan during a 1950s anti-Communist campaign, is Hong Kong's foreign-language-film entry in next year's Academy Awards.

In his private life, Yonfan appreciates the finer things. Paintings by renowned Chinese contemporary painters such as Lin Fengmian (1900-91) and the Chinese modern ink-painter Huang Yongyu (born 1924) hang on the walls of the apartment he has lived in since the 1980s. He likes to mix museum-quality works with personal mementos.

On his coffee table, for instance, sits an arrangement of stones, some of which belonged to his late friend Zhang Daqian (1899-1983), one of the biggest names in 20th-century Chinese ink painting. Yonfan is genuinely passionate about traditional Chinese culture, and continues to buy art and antiques.

When did you begin to seriously purchase art?

I started buying Chinese paintings some 30 years ago. I just loved them. In those days, the prices were reasonable, so you could buy good things. I used to ring up Sotheby's and Christie's in New York and bid on the telephone without seeing the real thing. But now you cannot because you have to inspect because of so many fakes. The first painting I bought was a Guan Liang (1900-87). I bought it at Sotheby's in the 1970s. I gave it to my goddaughter.

How is surrounding yourself with art related to your filmmaking?

Many artists try to eat well, drink well. We all find different ways to be inspired. Mine comes from unusual things, things with age, things that speak for themselves.

Why do you prefer classic Chinese art?

I believe in traditional thinking. I am avant-garde in my thought and the way I do other things, but the way I live, I am traditional, so there is a conflict. I am like the character in my movie "Prince of Tears," Madame Liu. She is a revolutionary but wants to be surrounded by beautiful things.

Why do you have so many works by Chinese painter Zhang Daqian?

I am a great admirer. I went to do a photo session with him in Taiwan, which is how we met. Then we became friends. I went to his home for dinner once, then he said: "I will do you a painting." I said: "Sure." Then out came a big piece of paper. I said: "Master, just do a small one for me." But he said it was easier for him to do a big one. The inscription says: "I was spending time with Yonfan and the spirit was high. This is to memorialize our meeting." He gave me two pieces and then I bought the other paintings from different sources. I have a fan that Zhang painted for (Chinese opera legend) Mei Lanfang, for his return to the stage after the Japanese occupation. It is now in China; it was borrowed for exhibition. I bought it at an auction.

Why is one of Zhang's canes hanging in your hallway and a brush in your living room?

His wife gave it to me. They donated his whole studio to Taiwan's National Palace Museum. The last day of moving out, I was there with Madame Zhang Daqian, and I asked if I could have one of his sticks as a souvenir. She said: "Yes, you better chose the one you like." It was very generous of her. That is one of the legendary brushes. He had 100 or so made in Japan, to use and to give to friends. It is supposed to be from very soft cow hair. Zhang was famous for them.

What is the story behind the piece by Chinese ink-painting master Huang Yongyu that is in your living room?

He is now in his 80s, living in China. Five years ago, he gave me that painting, inscribed with a dedication saying that every time he sees the flowers he thinks of me. I gave him the bunch of dried flowers 10 years before.

How did you get into furniture?

I love *huanghuali* [a tropical rosewood used in the finest Ming and Qing Dynasty furniture and now rare]. One of the pieces I have in my bedroom is a small 18th-century table. The very unusual thing is the four legs can fold. I got it from a dealer 20 years ago and at that time it was affordable. I have about 10 bigger pieces and many small ones, like boxes. Some are here in Hong Kong, some are in my [vacation] home in Thailand. I also have [equally rare] *zitan*-wood pieces.

What about teapots?

When I did a book, there was a teapot stand next to my exhibition at the book fair. They didn't sell anything and offered me some. One pot I bought because it looks like Aladdin's lamp. Now it is 19 years later and I saw something similar for sale in Beijing for 350,000 yuan (US$51,260). It is now crazy.

What are the stories behind the paintings in your bedroom?

I have a Lin Fengmian painting that many collectors are looking for. He did the work in China in the 1960s and the boy in the picture is the brother of Feng Ye, Lin's goddaughter, who owns many of his works. The Qi Baishi (1863-1957) chilies just seemed to fit in this place. I have a misty scene of a beach by Zhang Daqian; it is splashed ink with white powder. The unusual thing about it is Zhang was describing it as how he experienced Pebble Beach in California. For me it has a link to the old times, a friend and the new.

Why did you add your own penmanship to the painting "Washing the Ink Pot by the Stream," which is in your sitting room?

I wrote: "My first knowledge of Chinese painting was when I was young and I lived in Taichung. When I started school, I heard about the great Chinese painters but never saw the originals. In 1971, I went to England and had the chance to see genuine paintings of the Ming Dynasty and was overwhelmed. In 1991, I went to the [Arthur M.] Sackler Gallery [in Washington, D.C.] for a Zhang Daqian exhibit, then went to New York and saw this painting at Sotheby's and hope that it will not part from me."

What happened to all the paintings by Ding Yangyong (1902-78) that you bought?

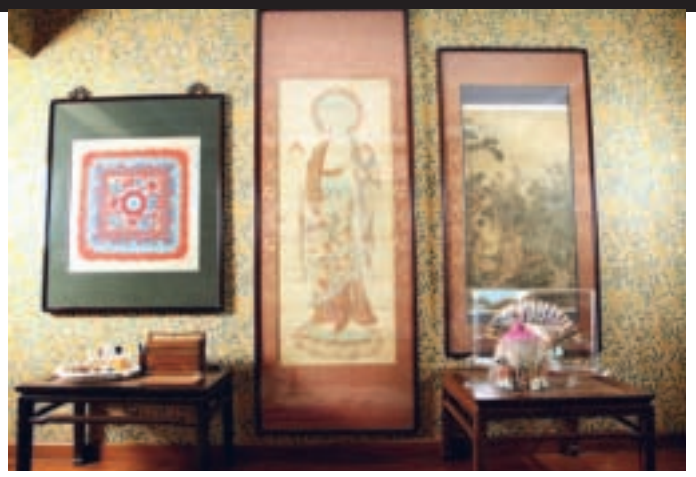
He is an artist who was not appreciated in Hong Kong at all until many years after his death. I used to buy his paintings for HK$200 [about US$25] at Swindon Bookstore. I gave them to friends. I remember the day he died. That was Christmas 1978. Someone called me and so I went to Swindon at Ocean Terminal and found they were exactly the same price as before, so I bought more for my friends for gifts.

The thumbnail sketch

Home: Hong Kong
Signature style: Art-house movies
New film: "Prince of Tears," which opened last month in Hong Kong and Taiwan
What he collects: Classical Chinese paintings, pottery, teapots and furniture

Samantha Sin for The Wall Street Journal

Above, an ink painting by Zhang Daqian, inscribed by the artist with a dedication to Yonfan, hangs above a table that holds a Tiffany lamp and other antiques; visible behind the plate, in a frame, are the bamboo handles of a pair of Zhang's famous brushes, made with hairs from a cow's ear by a Japanese artisan. Right, an American baby-grand piano from the 1930s sits beneath a painting by a contemporary Brazilian artist, purchased by Yonfan in São Paulo.



Far left, Yonfan sits on an Art Deco sofa in front of a painting of flowers by Huang Yongyu and a Qing dynasty zitan-wood cabinet. Left, two paintings by Zhang Daqian and a 16th-century landscape ink painting by Qiu Ying hang above two huanghuali-wood tables.

When you were making photographs, you were considered the Richard Avedon of Chinese cinema. Why is it the only photos in your home are personal?

The photos that I made are in my head, why should I hang them up? I gave a whole bunch of my work to the Hong Kong Heritage museum, and to a Taiwan museum.

How do you find things to buy these days?

Sometimes in stores, auctions, during trips. When I travel I always want to buy something as a souvenir: a Brazilian painting, a Russian flag, a piece of ivory. I'm not always looking but it is part of life. I get curious. Eight years ago I was in São Paulo to curate an exhibition of Zhang Daqian paintings. I liked a painting by a Brazillian artist. Something doesn't have to be extremely valuable but I enjoy things that are original. I would love to make a film in Brazil.

How has the quality of art at auction changed?

The real good things are hard to come by. The auctions have become bigger; they need more volume. Many of the good pieces, people do not want to sell. There are only a certain number of good pieces in this world while the market demands more.

When computers sell better, Taiwan tycoons have more money. In the old days, paintings in New York were classical Chinese paintings and a small section of contemporary ones. Back then, people would bring their things and consign. There were a lot of [Chinese modern paintings by] Qi Baishi, Zhang Daqian—they were not recognized. But now the most important things are here in Hong Kong because of the China buyers.

How do you describe your approach to collecting?

If I see something that I like, even if it is not by someone famous. I don't think I'm really a "collector." Now you see "collections" being sold here and there. In the old school you collect, not trying to make a profit. You should have the integrity of just enjoying the things, and after getting the knowledge, donate. A few years ago, I gave some Zhang Daqian paintings to the Musée Guimet in Paris. Nowadays people [create] a collection, then go to the auction house. I enjoy beautiful things.

Alexandra A. Seno is a writer based in Hong Kong.

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Rock Growth by Arik Levy. Image: courtesy of Arik Levy.

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CITY WALK: Vientiane

Take it slow on this jaunt through the Laotian capital

By David Evans

Hannah Stouffer

There's an unofficial slogan making the rounds in Vientiane among some of the city's residents. It's based on the country's official title—Peoples' Democratic Republic—and reflects their view on how quickly the government should develop the country's tourism industry: Please Don't Rush.

That's exactly how you should approach a walking tour of Vientiane.

Unlike the capitals of Laos's neighbors, Vientiane has a laid-back, small-town feel that makes exploring its nooks and crannies a pleasure. Here, you can dawdle, map in hand, without fear of hassle from the incessant hawkers and cyclo-drivers that plague other Asian cities. And it retains much of its former French colonial charm, with colorful Buddhist temples nestled among what were the grand villas of important families of the day.

It's easier here than in, say, Ho Chi Minh City or Bangkok to imagine the city when Italian-made Vespa scooters—not Chinese-made Jinlongs—buzzed up and down the narrow lanes. Of course, there has been some development and while the city is empty of towering glass-and-steel edifices, some buildings seem to have come straight from the Soviet-era school of architecture where function rules over aesthetics.

Vientiane's tree-lined streets make walking delightful at almost any time of day. An early-morning start will avoid the worst of the heat; but if you wait until later in the afternoon, you'll finish in time for a cold glass of beer on the banks of the Mekong River just as the sun is going down. Whatever you decide, don't stick too rigidly to the map because there's probably something just as fascinating around the other corner.

8 A.M. THANON LANE XANG

The best starting point is the city's most prominent architectural feature, Patuxai (open 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. weekdays, to 5 p.m. weekends).

The Victory Gate, as the rough translation has it, looks similar to the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. Was this planned? Yes. The French original inspired this 1960s structure, yet the architect here was allowed license for embellishment, and the result is a much more elaborate affair than its Western rival.

Patuxai has four, rather than two, arched entrances, its cornices are Laotian in style and it is capped with distinctive pagoda-like turrets. Walk between the arches where the cool stone gives off a comforting earthy smell and crane your head upward to view the Buddhist images painted on the ceiling.

The archway is set in beautifully manicured gardens around which traffic buzzes, and is a popular stop for coach tours. Yet few seem willing to pay the 3,000 kip (35 U.S. cents) to climb the 124 steps, via two floors selling tourist paraphernalia, to the top. But it's worth it. From there, you get a magnificent 360-degree bird's-eye view of the city and respite from the crowds below. Though you stand above a busy traffic intersection, it's the sound of the cicadas that's noticeable. Even more obvious from this vantage is the absence of the brown blanket of pollution that hovers over most Southeast Asian cities.

Back down to ground level, make your way to the right lane of Thanon Lane Xang and head toward the Mekong. (The Laotian and Thai languages share many common words such as "thanon" for "road.")

During spring, the trees lining this avenue are rich with blossoms in hues of pink and lilac. The streets are clean; municipal workers are helped in this task by school children, two to a bamboo pole supporting a plastic sack while the rest scurry behind filling it up.

The architecture here is a mixture of modern-Asian, functional-communist and colonial styles. The left side of the street is dominated by small businesses and sidewalk eateries; on the right, it's government offices, hotels and financial institutions.

Turn right on Thanon Bartholomie and follow the high white walls surrounding the U.S. Embassy. Take the first left on Thanon Chanta Khumman.

9 A.M. THAT DAM STUPA

Occupying the center of a roundabout in this back-street urban setting is That Dam stupa (a stupa is a dome-shaped Buddhist shrine). Legend has it that the monument was once coated in gold and was ransacked in 1828 by the invading Siamese during a war that destroyed most of Vientiane. Another tale says it's home to a dormant seven-headed dragon. Today, its exposed red brick is turning black and greenery is sprouting from the cracks in the mortar.

Continue down Thanon Chanta Khumman until you reach the busier Thanon Setthathirath, and turn left. Here, on the right, is the stately Presidential Palace set among more immaculately manicured gardens (all the gardens around the monuments on this walk are beautifully tended).

The palace was once home to the colonial French governor and later, after independence in 1953, to King Sisavang Vong. It's now used mostly for official ceremonies. Unfortunately, it's not open to the public and can only be viewed properly from one of the side gates used to allow government staff in and out, or through the bars of the main gate.

Keep walking on Thanon Setthathirath. Just past the Ministry for Information and Culture on your left, you'll cross the bottom of Thanon Lane Xang. Glancing back up you'll see Patuxai standing impressively at the top of the street.

On the corner here (of Thanon Setthathirath and Thanon Lane Xang) is Wat Sisaket, the city's oldest temple, built about 1820. (A wat is a Buddhist monastic center.)

The temple and its gardens are contained within a high wall, and it's worth taking the time to sit under the shade of a tree and contemplate your surroundings over a cold soda from the vendor. The interior cloister walls are home to more than 2,000 silver and ceramic images of Buddha, each in its own little

This city has a laid-back, small-town feel that makes exploring its nooks and crannies a pleasure.

niche. There are also 300 seated and standing images of varying sizes and materials littered along the shelves underneath. There's a seated golden Buddha, about four times the size of a man, placed under an elaborately decorated pagoda, and another shelters a cask-size ceremonial drum.

Walk down Thanon Mahosat and at the bottom, walk across Quai Fa Ngum. Turn right and begin the walk along the banks of the Mekong. In winter, the river's water level falls dramatically—imagine a dry dust bowl; in spring, with the rain, the riverside becomes lush and the water level rises.

As you walk along the palm-shaded path, food-hawker stands begin to spring up on the left, becoming denser the farther along and closer you get to the river. Here, you can sit and enjoy a cold beer and grilled river fish for just a few dollars. If it's lunchtime, stop at the cafe PVO and join local office workers for a Laotian-style baguette with pâte and a fresh juice.

On the right side of the path, a long row of Laotian- and Chinese-style shops with colorful window shutters are book ended by two temples, Wat Xiang Yeug and Wat Chan. These shops are occupied mostly by small, independent restaurants and bars. The area has been earmarked for development, and many fear it may soon lose much of its character.

10 A.M. QUAI FA NGUM

Opposite Wat Sisaket, on the corner of Thanon Setthathirath and Thanon Mahosat, is the equally impressive temple, Haw Pha Kaeo. It was built in 1565 to house the Emerald Buddha, a famous statue carved from green jasper originally kept in Chiang Rai, later moved to Chiang Mai and then to Vientiane (it was returned to Thailand in 1784). The roof of the former royal temple's huge ordination hall is easily visible from outside the two-meter-high wall that surrounds the shrine's gardens. The building is now a museum showcasing Laotian art.

11 A.M. WAT CHAN

Follow the river as far as Wat Chan, and to the right of the temple as you face it is a road so small it doesn't have a name. Walk up the lane and you'll find yourself surrounded by traditional Laotian family homes in various states of disrepair.

Among the worst, twisted branches are visible through the crumbling clay plaster, and weather-worn shutters hang awkwardly off their hinges. Yet some have been lovingly restored back to their lime-washed, timber-framed splendor.

A few homes are undergoing renovation thanks to a group called Unique Laos Properties. Because owners of these timber-framed buildings often find it cheaper to demolish and build a new home rather than renovate, Unique Laos Properties helps families find other accommodations, and organizes the renovation work as well.

At the end of this street you'll find yourself at the back of the temple Wat Ong Teu. Turn left past the excellent Makphet Restaurant managed by Friends International, a nonprofit group focused on helping underprivileged youth, and staffed by rehabilitated street children.

When you reach Thanon Chao Anou, turn right and walk up to the junction with Thanon Setthathirath and turn right again. You are now in front of Wat Ong Teu, which is part of the Sangha College complex. This is a college for novice monks, so the area is dotted with bright orange robes and shaved heads bobbing under black umbrellas.

Continue along Thanon Setthathirath past Wat Hai Sok on the left. When you reach Wat Mixay on the right, turn left and go up Thanon Nokeo Khumman and stop at the sign on the right that says Carol Cassidy Textiles (www.laotextiles.com). This building houses Ms. Cassidy's army of weavers working on the American's own designs. While her silk shawls and wall hangings are definitely worth a look, visitors also get a chance to see inside a building that was once home to a well-off French family. While simple in design and in need of a lick of paint, the centuries-old home with its worn wooden floors and peeling lime-washed walls harks back to an altogether different time.

By contrast, a few meters up the road, on land once part of the Cassidy Textiles house, stands the Lao National Culture Hall, a gift from the Chinese government. Unfortunately, this 1990s hulk with its cheap gold paint and stained whitewash smacks of a bureaucrat's ideal of what a cultural hall should look like, rather than what could tastefully occupy the space.

NOON. NAMPHOU FOUNTAIN

Retrace your steps to Thanon Setthathirath. The area in and around Namphou Fountain is popular with expatriates because of its cafes, which serve excellent coffees and pastries. The Scandinavian Bakery at the northeast corner of the square has a covered first-floor balcony that provides a great spot to sit and reflect on your past four hours in Vientiane.

David Evans lives in Edinburgh and is a frequent traveler to Asia.

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AFTER HOURS: HONG KONG

In the evening, it's easy to find relief from the city's madness

By Jessica Yu

Another in a series on ways for a traveler in a strange town to fill the time after the sun goes down

For the millions of screen slavers emerging from a long day in a cubicle, or business travelers seeking to put an endless string of meetings behind them, Hong Kong makes an evening of recovery surprisingly easy.

To start with, if you're looking to let off some steam with a little physical activity, it's a great town for walking. Not in the skyscraper forest, where the unwary pedestrian among the apparently randomly scurrying crowds feels like a human mahjong tile during intergame shuffle, but as little as five minutes out of the central business district by taxi. That's all it takes to reach the start of the Morning Trail, a well-paved, well-lit path that takes you 2.8 kilometers up Victoria Peak.

It illustrates one of the greatest things about this city: How easy it is to get away from all that is "city." Thanks to the government's tight land-supply policy, the metropolis doesn't sprawl but instead grows taller and tighter—meaning green areas stay green, large and nearby.

On the trail, you'll be enmeshed within minutes by plants and trees and all sorts of natural things that are foreign to the world of shimmering skyscrapers just departed. You'll even pass a waterfall. In less than an hour you'll reach the top and a momentary interruption to the natural serenity: two shopping centers. This is still Hong Kong, after all.

The Peak Tower—which is also where the Peak Tram ends (note, for the lazy)—offers a platform at the top for a fee, but across the street the Peak Galleria offers pretty much the same view for free. You can dine there, too. Just stop in at Il Bel Paese, an Italian deli, and pick up some fresh lasagna and a bottle of Chianti before heading to the rooftop.

On an unpolluted night, the view extends to both sides of Hong Kong Island and across the harbor to Kowloon and the New Territories beyond. From here, you can really appreciate exactly how much of Hong Kong's hills are still green and undeveloped.

Top, you can see a lot from Wooloomooloo's rooftop bar. Above, left to right, the White Grape Martini is one of many cocktails on offer at Yu Club; passengers on a so-called squid boat bobbing for cuttlefish; the Aqua Luna 'sails' the harbor.

Another place to exercise away the day's frustrations is a short ride away from work on the MTR (Hong Kong's metro). Open until 11 p.m., the City Golf Club driving range, on the water and right across the street from the Kowloon station, offers 180 bays on multiple levels—ample opportunity to practice your swing or visualize your boss's head on a tee. (Not yours, of course, boss!) You're close enough to the towers of Kowloon that you feel you might bounce a shot off one. (To feel like Superman, take advantage of the laws of physics and tee off from the top bay.) Afterward pop out front to Thai Mary's restaurant for a beer and curry.

Another of Hong Kong's relaxing resources, ranking with the green hills, is its famous harbor. And while the continual reclamation projects seem to foreshadow a day when Hong Kong Harbour becomes Hong Kong Stream, for the time being there's still plenty of water around to be enjoyed.

If you want an experience that may be unique to Hong Kong, consider a squid-fishing tour. (Despite its name, the quarry is actually that squid cousin the cuttlefish; according to one local, the reason for the slight misnaming is that in Cantonese, "frying cuttlefish" is slang for being fired. From late spring to early autumn, the waters off the New Territories teem with these boats, easy to pick out by the cuttlefish-attracting floodlights off the side and the eruptions of "Waaaaah!" when someone makes a catch.

As a sport, it's not exactly marlin fishing. Your weaponry consists of standard fishing line and a jig. It takes no bait, and next to no effort; just bob your wrist up and down and wait. The boat crew cooks up the bounty for consumption on the spot, but you don't have to be in it for the eating. (There is usually also an unremarkable Chinese buffet.) The shiny cuttlefish, with the pigmentation that changes right before your eyes, are fascinating to look at, and entirely in keeping with the Hong Kong obsession with the sparkly. Or, speaking of sparkly, you can just sit back and enjoy the multicolored lights of Hong Kong as they shimmer on the water.

But there are days when even the idea of laboring to catch food—or of physical exertion for fun—seems, quite frankly, unnecessary. We live in the modern age, after all, so let's not ignore the accomplishments of those who came before us. Instead, let us enthusiastically embrace today's world in all its effortless splendor.

So how about a boat ride that doesn't take you out to catch some sea creature, but just carries you on a 45-minute cruise around the harbor and then drops you off a five-minute walk from a restaurant where they bring the food right to you? And what if your table were 28 floors up, with those same city lights spread before you? Catch the Aqua Luna, an almost-traditional Chinese junk (the vibrant red sails are for show; it's powered by an engine). Get aboard the 7:30 sailing from Central and you'll also catch the "Symphony of Lights," a nightly spectacle of flashing buildings and rooftop lasers set to music.

The restaurant is on the Kowloon side: Hutong, meticulously designed from floor to ceiling to teacup to resemble an old, but very posh and dramatically lit *hutong* (one of the rapidly disappearing alleyways that wind through the ancient neighborhoods of Beijing). The crispy deboned lamb ribs are diet-unfriendly but completely worth it.

Or forget about boats, stay on the Hong Kong side and just head for Café Gray Deluxe. Situated at the top of the newly opened Upper House hotel, this swanky escape is the world of slick, luxury-magazine photo spreads come to life.

For a first plate, the green salad of foie gras and lentils is an adventure in texture and temperature, though if what you seek after a long day is warmth and comfort, the saffron pasta fiore is the way to go. For your second plate, skip the much-touted braised short rib of beef (unfortunately overpowered by a one-note sauce reminiscent of store-brand barbecue sauce), and instead go for the delicately flavored lavender grilled

Jessica Yu/The Wall Street Journal (fishing, Yu Club, peak view); the companies (4)

THE DETAILS

Morning Trail
Starts at the top of Hatton Road

Il Bel Paese
Shop 17-18, Level 1,
The Peak Galleria,
118 Peak Rd.
Open until 8 p.m.
☎852-2849-2834
Web: www.ilbelpaese.com.hk

City Golf Club/Thai Mary restaurant
8 Wui Cheung Rd.,
Jordan, Kowloon
Open until 11 p.m.
Bays, about US$8 an hour;
club rental, about $1.30
☎852-2992-3333 (club)
☎852-2199-7392 (restaurant)
Web: www.citygolfclub.com

Jubilee (squid fishing)
Tsim Sha Tsui Pier, Kowloon
Trip lasts from 7 p.m. until 11 p.m.
About US$14 to $22
(includes equipment; price depends
on the date and whether food
is provided)
☎852-2530-0530
Web: www.jubilee.com.hk

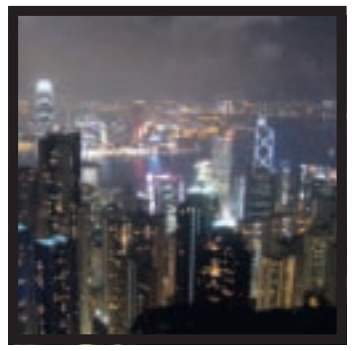
Aqua Luna
Harbor cruise from Tsim Sha Tsui
Pier, Kowloon, or Pier 9, Central
About US$23 a person; one standard
beverage included
☎852-2116-8821
Web: www.aqua.com.hk

Hutong
1 Peking Rd., Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon
Dinner: 6 p.m. to late
☎852-3428-8342
Web: www.aqua.com.hk

Café Gray Deluxe
Level 49, The Upper House, Pacific
Place, 88 Queensway, Central
Dinner: 6:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m.
Drinks: 11 a.m. to 1 a.m.
☎852-3968-1106
Web: www.cafegrayhk.com

Yu Club
13/F Luk Yu Building,
24-26 Stanley St., Central
Monday-Thursday, 5 p.m. to 2 a.m.;
Friday and Saturday, 5 p.m. to late;
closed Sunday
☎852-2868-1833

Wooloomooloo Steakhouse (Wanchai)
31F & rooftop, The Hennessy,
256 Hennessy Rd., Wanchai
11:45 a.m. to late; rooftop opens at 6 p.m.
☎852-2893-6960
Web: www.wooloo-mooloo.com



Left, top, the entrance to Café Gray Deluxe hints at the stylish experience inside; bottom, swingers can hang out at City Golf Club's driving range until 11 p.m. Right, the view from the rooftop of The Peak Galleria is free to those who make the climb.

snapper and mashed potatoes.

And tonight's not the night to pass on dessert. You deserve a treat—and the chocolate rum toast with rum raisin ice cream is magnificent.

For a more relaxed but equally trendy venue, there's the Yu Club. Decorated in glamorous retro Hong Kong style, it's intimate—room for just 50 chic lounge lizards on its eclectic mix of plush couches, leather ottomans and brightly patterned day beds. Like many establishments in Hong Kong, the club is technically members-only but membership is easy: Simply call ahead and ask for it (even from outside the door).

General manager and chief bartender Jeff Cheng makes a great cocktail, especially for a man who says he doesn't like to drink. His Death by Chocolate is a milkshake for adults: vodka, crème de cacao, Tia Maria, Baileys, Kahlua and chocolate ice cream. And he supplements the extensive standing menu with daily offerings dictated by what's fresh at the local markets; you might get to try a Mango-Passion Fruit Martini. If you're lucky, you'll be around when Mr. Cheng is handing out some of his more whimsical creations, such as artfully assembled jello shots in flavors that include Mango Daiquiri and litchi sake.

To combine a civilized drink or two or six with the pleasures of the great outdoors, climb to the rooftop bar of Wooloomooloo's new Wanchai branch. Gazing over the 270-degree view, you're the king of the city. To the right, thoroughbreds round the bend inside Happy Valley racecourse. Straight ahead, boat lights twinkle on the water and the brake lights of a thousand red taxis and Ferraris flash on the spaghetti-strand highways. To the left, dotted windows of skyscrapers reveal the silhouettes of bankers hammering out the next megadeal (or perhaps their CVs).

Have another sip of champagne and at long last a peaceful revel in the beautiful frenzy that is Hong Kong.

WSJ.com

▶ To see more of Hong Kong after dark, click on **Asia.WSJ.com**.

By Steve Mollman

Charity begins at

Just in time for the season of giving, Fermin Taruc opted to do just that.

Last month he put his day job on hold as a software executive in Manila and flew to Africa for a six-month stint helping local officials formulate poverty-busting strategies in Zambia.

"I've been very fortunate in life and always wanted to get involved in some kind of social-development work," says the 46-year-old Filipino.

In the past few years, voluntourism, where tourists combine doing good deeds with a trip to an exotic locale, has taken off. Now, more people are going a step further: They are taking sabbaticals from their jobs, ranging from two weeks to a year, to be philanthropic volunteers.

Sometimes the individual funds the stint from savings. Other times an employer continues to pay the volunteer a salary—or a portion of it—and perhaps leaves some, if not all, benefits in place such as health insurance. Often, the charity organization pays a modest stipend and provides some benefits, including housing.

For companies, including multinationals such as India's Infosys Technologies and global accounting concern PricewaterhouseCoopers, it's an opportunity to give employees work experience in an emerging market, and serves as a kind of executive-training program. For individuals, it satisfies the yearning for a challenge and the desire to give something back.

Giving back is especially important to "generations X and Y," says Melanie Nutbeam, a director at iPac Financial Planning in Hong Kong. "They want to do something that they think is meaningful." Ms. Nutbeam has several clients, both men and women, who have taken or are planning to take sabbaticals lasting from three months to a year.

At CDC Development Solutions, which places volunteers with business skills from Asia and elsewhere as advisers to projects in developing countries, the number of applicants more than doubled this year from last, says Kate Ahern, director of business development. The nonprofit organization recently advertised a six-month volunteer assignment in Cambodia requiring an M.B.A. degree and got 115 applications.

Ms. Ahern thinks two factors are helping fuel the trend toward volunteering among career veterans as well as recent M.B.A. graduates: One is the increased focus by business schools and companies on social responsibility; the other is that today's employees need to know how to operate in an emerging market. Recent business-school graduates think the experience will make them more marketable, she adds.

The global economic slowdown might also be helping increase volunteer ranks. "For some people who did find themselves out of work, I've said, 'Look, go off and do something' and recommended that they go do charity work," says Allen Japp, an executive recruiter in Hong Kong, who took a sabbatical himself early this year to do charity (see related article below).

In Mr. Taruc's case, he was prepared to give up his job as chief operating officer of Gurango Software—with its six-figure U.S.-dollar compensation package—to take on a two-year assignment with Voluntary Service Overseas, or VSO, a charity that places skilled advisers in developing countries.

HOW TO HELP

Below are some organizations that accept volunteers. You might also check with your company to see if it partners with any organizations that offer volunteer programs.

Cold-calling charities can also work, but keep in mind that many will decline simply because the effort involved in determining which candidates have the right skills and then managing and training them for the job can outweigh the benefits.

■ **Voluntary Service Overseas,** or VSO, has been operating for over 50 years and has placed more than 40,000 volunteers in developing countries to help fight poverty.

Volunteers based in Asia should go through VSO Bahaginan, which is the charity's federation member in the region and a registered charity in the Philippines. See www.vsobahaginan.org.ph/volunteer. Volunteers pay no fee, have their expenses covered and receive a modest stipend as well as insurance coverage. Durations vary.

Companies can partner with VSO to set up programs for employees to go on volunteer stints. Learn more at www.vsointernational.org/partner-with-vso/corporate-partners, or email: marketing@vsobahaginan.org.

■ **CDC Development Solutions** offers a variety of volunteer opportunities of varying duration for M.B.A. holders. For an overview, go to www.cdcdevelopmentsolutions.org/volunteer-opportunities. Stints of two weeks to two months are available for a variety of skill-set holders (email: volunteer@cdc.org).

Longer-term assignments at a variety of social-impact organizations that require more specific qualifications are available through its MBA Enterprise Corps and MBA Without Borders programs. The former offers recent M.B.A. graduates—nominated by their business schools—one-year stints as embedded advisers. The latter matches M.B.A.s with specific projects. To apply directly to a specific project, go to

Taking sabbaticals to do good catches on work

In return, VSO provided him with lodging, insurance, transportation, a modest stipend—and the challenge he wanted in a foreign land. (VSO says the idea is to help volunteers break even financially, not profit from their sabbaticals. And the VSO Web site warns: "If you have any outstanding debts or are supporting dependents, you may want to consider if this is the right time for you to volunteer.")

Mr. Taruc found out about VSO from a newspaper article and approached the organization for a long-term assignment. Ultimately, he settled for a six-month gig. It worked out for the best. Rather than resign, he was able to take a sabbatical, with his boss agreeing to keep his job open. But Mr. Taruc's salary and company-provided health and other benefits were suspended.

Because Mr. Taruc's investment portfolio took a hit in the global financial crisis, having a job waiting when he gets back was a lucky break. He had been looking forward to retiring in his mid-50s and devoting himself full time to nonprofit work. But he says now that "I can't yet afford to quit work completely and then still expect to retire comfortably."

"Everyone has been very supportive," Mr. Taruc says of his co-workers and his boss, Joey Gurango.

"I think he will come back from this experience a much better human being," Mr. Gurango says, and bring "a fresh management perspective that will benefit our business."

The most common reaction of co-workers, friends and family, Mr. Taruc says, is: "I wish I could do that, too."

After a few weeks on the ground in Zambia, he's been struck by two things: the surprise at finding that Filipino soap operas (dubbed in English) are a hit there, and the frustratingly slow pace of getting anything done. "I've had to make a conscious effort to rein myself in a few times because work progress or feedback was slower than what I wanted," Mr. Taruc says by email.

Still, he's glad he took the plunge. "My major cost right now," he says, is loss of earnings and potentially losing out on work advancement. But "part of my motivation is selfish. I want to have an experience. I wanted to get as far away from my comfort zone as possible, free-fall and see how well I could survive."

Mr. Taruc, who is single and has no dependents, expects to dip into his savings to cover expenses, including insurance premiums he'll pay while he's away to stay in Gurango Software's health plan. (He's also covered by a comprehensive medical-insurance package from VSO while he is in Africa.) Before he left Manila, he made sure his bank accounts were in order and arranged for friends and a relative to hold a power of attorney giving them authority over his affairs in case of an emergency.

It's the kind of advice that Ms. Nutbeam, the financial planner, gives clients who are considering sabbaticals. Before they sign on, she first urges them to think about whether, and how, they can afford a break. Among other things, a potential volunteer needs to assess the impact of an immediate loss of income, the additional expense of paying for their own health-care coverage, including medical-evacuation insurance, and whether the loss of earnings means they will have to postpone retirement plans and work

www.projects.mbaswithoutborders.org.

With all of these programs, volunteers pay no fee, have their expenses covered and receive medical insurance and a modest stipend.

■ **Volans,** a for-profit company that connects corporate and other talent with social-impact organizations, currently is accepting applications for Volans Year (year.volans.com/program-overview). It's a new program designed for individuals to work for a year with organizations in Cambodia or Singapore. Volunteers pay $15,000, which includes one week a quarter of executive education for the volunteer. Volans seeks donations to provide scholarships so that more individuals can afford to participate.

■ **Habitat for Humanity,** a nonprofit group that provides shelter by building simple houses, accepts Asia-based volunteers through its International Volunteer Program (www.habitat.org), which has a variety of of jobs around the world, many of them office-based. Durations vary but are generally six months to a year. Typical assignments involve work in administration, communications and volunteer coordination. Individuals pay all costs associated with living abroad. In some cases there's a small monthly allowance, but it might not cover expenses. Contact AP_info@habitat.org.

■ **Unable to go anywhere for a long-term gig?** Consider volunteer work through Nabuur.com, where the focus is on donating your time via computer.

Go online to the Nabuur site to find a project (posted by a village representative from a developing country) where help is needed. Lend your knowledge, ideas and contacts. For instance, you might build a Web site, create a child-sponsorship program or research more effective farming techniques. Corporate sponsors pay the bills, so the site is free for volunteers and villagers. Patsian Low, a former banker, started volunteering through Nabuur in 2004. She spends four to five hours a week online, mostly from her home in Singapore. Her proudest accomplishment so far is helping a small village in India get much-needed assistance.

■ **Don't have a lot of time to give but want something more adventurous than sitting in front of a computer?** Allen Japp, an executive recruiter in Hong Kong, went on an 11-day charity ride along the Mekong River in northeast Thailand's Isaan region. Participants must raise a certain amount for charity. Mr. Japp raised more than $3,000 for Operation Smile, which provides reconstructive surgery for children with facial deformities. There's also a longer ride called Tour de Thailand. Click on www.tourdethailand.com/tour-de-isaan.html for more details.

Please turn to next page

Anne Smith

longer to make up for taking a break.

Once they decide to go, she recommends clients arrange an "enduring" power of attorney that ensures their affairs can be run by someone else in case the volunteer becomes too ill to make decisions. Potential volunteers should also review their assets and beneficiary designations to update their wills. And while most people don't like to think about it, it's important to determine and specify what should be done with their body in case they die on assignment; otherwise it could become a complex and expensive task for their family to deal with.

"A lot of people don't factor all this in," Ms. Nutbeam says. But once it's all set up, volunteers can "go off knowing they can afford to do this and they've got some protection in place."

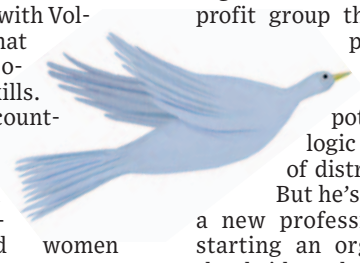
About 18 months ago, Bangalore-based Infosys, which has more than 105,000 employees, started a program to help employees do volunteer stints in India with nonprofit organizations or government agencies in fields such as education, agriculture and water sanitation. The aim is to expose its engineers, who often come from relatively privileged backgrounds, to other economic realities in the country.

But it's been slow going. partly because the program was rolled out just as the global economic slowdown began to instill job-loss fears. "There were many hesitant people," says Nandita Gurjar, head of the company's human-resources department. "Most of the employees said this is not a good time to venture out."

So far, while there's been a lot of interest, only nine employees have participated. The stints can last from six months to a year. Infosys continues to pay the volunteer, but at half the current salary, and the employee forgoes any bonuses and pension fund contributions during that time. Ms. Gurjar says that some who volunteered for a year are now asking for a six-month extension. The problem, she says, is that it becomes a greater challenge to reintegrate a volunteer after more than a year. And she's conscious that how the first wave of volunteers fits back into the workforce will influence the program's popularity.

Another risk: One volunteer appears so enthralled with her work in children's education that Ms. Gurjar worries she'll ask for repeated extensions—and that the company might lose her to the charity. "Then it's not a successful program," Ms. Gurjar says, "because the idea is that they come back."

Earlier this year, the Asian operations of PricewaterhouseCoopers teamed up with Volans, a fledgling for-profit company that matches corporate volunteers with social ventures in need of business skills. Five senior executives from the accounting firm's Singapore and China operations recently spent two-and-a-half weeks helping Hagar International, a hybrid social-entrepreneurial venture that employs disadvantaged women at its clothing factory in Cambodia.



"It's part of the development of our senior people," says Grace Thomas, who is director of responsible leadership development in Asia at the accounting firm. The Volans-program participants are expected to share their experiences with other PricewaterhouseCoopers' managers, she says.

Volans designs, markets and prices the program so that it's comparable with executive-training programs, says Kevin Teo, one of Volans's founding partners in Singapore. An executive coach observes and suggests better ways to lead and communicate. And by helping Hagar with taxation issues, operation reviews and the like, the executives ultimately help the factory workers. Hagar needs such professional services to expand and improve, says founder Pierre Tami, but on the open market, "there is no way we could ever afford it." Now he gets it for free.

Volans says a portion of the profits it makes will go toward helping Hagar and similar social-impact ventures continue to get professional services at no charge.

Sometimes a sabbatical of any duration just isn't enough, and a career change is in order.

Late last year, Tim Elliott, 36, quit his job in Seattle as the finance chief of Calidora Skin Clinic, a skin-care company with operations in Washington state and California. He's now in Phnom Penh pondering the most efficient ways to get ceramic water filters to the poorest of the poor.

It's an eight-month volunteer stint with an organization called PATH, an international nonprofit group that tries to break the cycle of poverty. Mr. Elliott is advising on a project that aims to get local businesses to sell the ceramic pots for a profit; market forces, the logic goes, are a more powerful engine of distribution than handouts.

But he's using the stint as a beta test for a new professional life. He's contemplating starting an organization for Southeast Asia that bridges the gap between nongovernmental organizations, social investors and local entrepreneurs who need larger amounts, say $50,000, than is possible through microfinance.

Mr. Elliott found the volunteer position through MBAs Without Borders, part of CDC Development Solutions, after researching various volunteer programs. Previously, he's also volunteered to help build homes in Brazil and teach English in rural India. He notes it's difficult to find organizations that match skills well unless you're a doctor or teacher. Some of the organizations that charge volunteers for the experience, he adds, "really don't need you as much as they need your money."

MBAs Without Borders lets him leverage his business skills to make a difference for the better, he says.

"I explicitly left my job because I have decided that I need more in my professional life than a nice title and a big paycheck."

Steve Mollman is an Asia-based writer.

■ The do-it-yourself option

For those who want to do good outside an established framework, Michael Nissen offers a cautionary tale of perseverance.

A 47-year-old retinal surgeon in New York, Dr. Nissen hopes to spread his expertise to Thailand and elsewhere through his nonprofit organization called the Insight Foundation. But while he may be highly qualified as a surgeon, he's a newbie at setting up a charity.

The inspiration came from a brief trip to Peru with other specialists about five years ago to provide eye surgery for people who couldn't afford it. When the mission was over, Dr. Nissen had an epiphany: Local doctors could continue the work he'd done over the few days—if only they had equipment, training and a confidence boost.

He left behind a $2,500 piece of equipment for a local eye surgeon, only to realize on the flight home that he hadn't handed over the $100 lens that enables it to work. "I bet it never got used again."

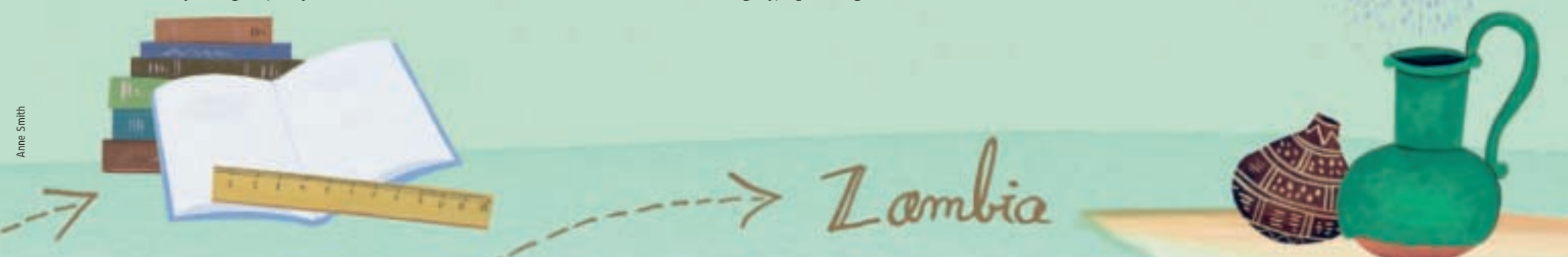
The idea behind his foundation is to provide such surgeons with the tools and training they need. But that requires money, which requires donations. Back in the U.S., it took nearly three years for his application to set up a tax-exempt nonprofit foundation to make its way through the bureaucracy.

He has gotten some donations, mostly from his U.S. patients. But to raise more he needs a case study to point to for credibility. So, after considering various options he's decided to team up with a colleague who's connected with an ophthalmic surgery center in Thailand that gets state funding. That will help buy the needed retinal-surgery equipment. (Compared with the more-common cataract surgery, operating on a retina requires costlier equipment.)

Dr. Nissen's current thinking is that they can bring some ophthalmic surgeons from the Thai center to New York to learn procedures and how to use the equipment, and then accompany them to Thailand, with some new equipment in tow, to help get the retinal surgery going. After that, he figures advice and training can be provided from New York via high-speed Internet connections.

His vision is for the surgeons he trains to train others. "My idea for this," Dr. Nissen says, "is to have it snowball." Meanwhile, he's about to start a family as well as setting up his own office in Manhattan. "It's extraordinarily difficult," he says of juggling his start-up charity efforts. "The time constraints are mind-blowing."

—Steve Mollman



Anne Smith

What to give...

Helpful hints for holiday gifts this season

By Amy Ma and Nellie S. Huang

THE EPICUREAN

1. Nespresso's Citiz & Milk C120 can make espresso, cappucino and lungo: about US$476; a sleeve of 10 coffee capsules costs US$6 to US$7.

2. Riedel's 'O' stemless collection includes glasses designed particularly to hold Pinot, Riesling and Viognier: about US$15 to US$17 each.

3. Cheese set provides knives for the full cheese range (spreadable, soft, medium-firm and hard) and a wooden block to hold them: about US$39.

4. Kid's kitchen set includes miniature, safe versions of cookie cutters, brushes and wooden spoons (not all items shown): about US$20.

5. Oliver Hemming 'Spice Boy' can grind salt, pepper and more: about US$55.

6. Gien 'Dessert Gourmand' hand-painted porcelain plates were inspired by recipes from a 1950s cookbook: set of four, about US$114.

7. Ercuis 'Capitaine' decanter is in crystal, with silver accent: about US$484.

8. Le Chasseur cast-iron crepe pan comes with a wooden paddle and spatula (plus a crepe recipe, for inspiration): about US$78.

Purveyors include Nespresso shops (No. 1) and these Hong Kong retailers: Rare & Fine Wines (No. 2); Pantry Magic (Nos. 3 to 5); Heather & March (Nos. 6 and 7); and The Pan-Handler (No. 8).

All photos by SCS Asia Pacific

THE FASHIONISTA

1. J.Mendel white mink coat comes with a black belt: about US$16,200

2. Erickson Beamon silver and gold-plated necklace, with Swarovski crystals: about US$1,150

3. Judith Leiber bags studded with Swarovski crystals: about US$4,170 (cat) and $6,100 (dog)

4. Pomellato 'Tango' bracelet in 18K pink gold with brown diamonds: about US$31,000

5. Badgley Mischka gold-plate watch of Swarovski crystal: about US$500

6. Ippolita 18K gold 'Mosaic' bracelet: about US$4,300

7. Coach's 'Amanda' leopard-sequin wristlet: about US$490

8. Coach's 'Sequin & Silk Skinny' scarf: about US$150

Purveyors include Coach (Nos. 7 and 8) and Hong Kong retailers Lane Crawford (Nos. 1 to 4 and No. 6) and On Pedder (No. 5).

THE PLAYER

1. The Panasonic Lumix DMC-GF1 is a more compact version of its G1 single-lens-reflex camera: about US$970

2. The Joby Gorillapod flexes to hold your camera steady almost anywhere: about US$25

3. Dal Negro's 'Contenitore Super Roulette' board game includes a chess set, mahogany roulette wheel, gambling chips and playing cards: about US$2,300

4. The Suunto X10 watch packs in a GPS navigator, altimeter, barometer and compass: about US$550

5. This Rolleiflex digital camera is a miniature replica of its classic twin-lens film sibling: about US$500

6. The Sleeptracker Elite wristwatch helps you optimize your sleep: about US$195

7. IDEA balloon speakers plug into the earphone jack of an MP3 player: about US$40

8. Kindle 3G wireless e-book with leather cover: US$289

Purveyors include www.sleeptrackerasia.com (No. 6; free shipping); Amazon.com (No. 8; shipping to Asia, about $20) and Hong Kong retailer Lane Crawford (Nos. 2, 3, 5, and 7).

A polo match aboard an elephant

What: Gather your adventurous friends and learn the basics of "mahouting" or elephant driving. Unlike polo ponies, the elephants are not allowed to block goals or kick the ball (one of the younger ones does tend to break these rules).
Where: Four Seasons Tented Camp, Golden Triangle, Thailand
Contact: ☎ 66-53-910-200 or email reservations.thailand@fourseasons.com
Price: A three-day tournament costs US$150,000 for up to 30 people (includes accommodations, food and beverage plus a spa treatment for each guest).

A private performance by Lang Lang

What: The celebrated Chinese pianist will perform for you for up to 90 minutes.
Where: Anywhere you choose
Contact: www.langlang.com
Price: US$350,000 donation to the Lang Lang International Music Foundation.

Just for You

By Amy Ma *Illustrations by Laura Williams*

A cocktail party with mixologist Eben Freeman

What: New Yorker Eben Freeman, a leader in modern mixology—the father of the alcoholic gummy bear (flavored with absinthe, say)—throws a cocktail party in the location of your choice, including your home. Sample his signature creations, including bubble-gum martinis and yes, the gummy bears.
Where: Anywhere you choose
Contact: Email cocktailallstars@gmail.com
Price: About US$11,400 for 40 to 50 people (including airfare, standard alcohol and stemware).

A molecular cooking class with chef Uwe Opocensky

What: Distill the scent of Wagyu beef into perfume and whip up "spherified" balls and foams in this two-hour class with Mandarin Oriental Hong Kong executive chef Uwe Opocensky. Lunch follows at the Mandarin Grill.
Where: Mandarin Grill, Mandarin Oriental Hong Kong
Contact: ☎ 852-2825-4004 or email mohkg-grill@mohg.com
Price: About US$500.

A scuba-diving tour of the Great Wall of China

What: A section of the Great Wall in Hebei province has been submerged since the Luanhe River was dammed to create a reservoir in the 1980s. Make an underwater visit to this largely unexplored part of the wall, built during the Ming dynasty.
Contact: Urbane Nomads ☎ 65-6728-8614; www.urbanenomads.com
Price: US$2,500 (includes accommodations and equipment rental but no international airfares).

A one-on-one pastry class with Jean-Paul Hévin

What: Chocolatier Jean-Paul Hévin has shops in France, Japan and Hong Kong. In this three-hour private class, he shares his award-winning recipes for macarons and other pastries.
Where: Jean-Paul Hévin, IFC Mall, Hong Kong
Contact: ☎ 852-2583-9118 or email marketing@jphevin.com.hk
Price: US$2,580.

You

A private dinner prepared by chef Pierre Gagnaire

What: The Michelin three-star chef will create a menu of your favorites and prepare dinner for you at his eponymous restaurant in Hong Kong.
Where: Pierre, Mandarin Oriental Hong Kong, Hong Kong
Contact: ☎ 852-2825-4001 or email mohkg-pierre@mohg.com
Price: If Mr. Gagnaire must fly in, about US$27,700 (airfare included); if he's in town, about US$17,750.

Memorable experiences to enjoy and to share

A customized online game by Second Life

What: Get "virtual" on Second Life, the world's largest 3-D online community. Work with a team at Second Life to create a range of options not available to regular members, such as custom-designed clothes and shoes for your avatar, your own TV show on Treet TV, Second Life's online TV station, or even your own virtual city.
Contact: For shoes, "Feather Grizot" of Stiletto Moody for Second Life (create a Second Life account online to contact this "resident"); for a TV show, "Starr Sonic" at Second Life; for a city, visit secondlife.com/land
Price: Shoes, US$750; TV show, $1,200; virtual city, $150,000.

A private tour and concert in ancient Turkey

What: Tour the ancient city of Ephesus at sunset and dine under moonlight at the landmark ruins of the Roman-era Celsus Library while the Izmir State Symphony Orchestra plays a private concert.
Contact: Abercrombie & Kent at ☎ 1-800-554-7016; www.abercrombiekent.com
Price: About US$13,000 (includes accommodations but no airfares).

David Hagerman for The Wall Street Journal

THE DISH:

Khao soi

Chiang Mai's fiery noodles are truly a melting pot *By Robyn Eckhardt*

'You could say that *khao soi* is in our blood," laughs Chiang Mai native Wilaiwan Petsophonsakul of her city's signature dish, an ambrosial medley of flat, yellow egg noodles and chicken, beef or pork in a coconut milk-based red curry soup.

The concoction is crowned with crunchy, deep-fried noodles and cilantro leaves, drizzled with rich coconut cream, and served with sliced shallots, lime, pickled mustard and a sweet-hot chili sauce called *nam prik paow.*

Khao soi is so closely identified with Chiang Mai that it sometimes appears on overseas Thai menus simply as "Chiang Mai noodle." Yet the dish isn't local at all, but a fusionist creation abetted by migration and entrepreneurial ingenuity.

THE HISTORY

Khao soi's antecedent is thought to be a noodle dish that made its way to Chiang Mai from Burma, now known as Myanmar, with the *Chin Ho* (also spelled *Chin Haw*), the Thai name for Chinese Muslims from Yunnan who in the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries plied a trade route through Burma, Thailand and Laos in horse- and mule-pulled caravans, some settling along the way.

The dish's earliest purveyors were Chin Ho, and though some contemporary versions of khao soi contain pork, it was originally *halal* (pork-free and thus acceptable for Muslims to eat). Wanida Lertpunwilai, the second-generation Chin Ho owner of the revered Chiang Mai restaurant Khao Soi Islam, says that her aunt sold the dish from her kitchen long before her parents opened their shop 40 years ago.

Coconut milk is a rare ingredient in northern Thailand, and its inclusion in khao soi has led to speculation that the dish is a local version of *ohn-no kyaukswe,* a Burmese coconut-milk and noodle soup. But other factors point to origins with the Shan, a people who live primarily in Myanmar.

K. Sawat Pettongkam, owner with his wife of khao soi purveyor Suthasinee, tells of his wife's Chin Ho grandfather, who migrated to Chiang Mai from Yunnan after spending a few years in the Shan region of Myanmar. Traveling by foot, he carried "*bpa bpa soi,* which was cooked rice pressed into a block," says Mr. Pettongkam. From this he cut "noodle" strips to add to soups he made with vegetables and wild game.

After settling in Chiang Mai, Mr. Pettongkam's grandfather-in-law began selling a clear soup, made with the bpa bpa soi "noodles." He passed the business on to his son, who with his wife opened the original Suthasinee. Over time, the couple replaced rice noodles with egg noodles and added curry paste and coconut milk to the broth.

In fact there is a Shan dish called *kao soi* that's comprised of rice noodles topped with a coconut-free tomato and meat sauce. "In Shan, '*kao*' means 'rice' and '*soi*' means 'to cut,'" explains Jotika Khur-yearn, of London's Shan Cultural Association, by email. "The traditional way of making the noodle is: rice is ground, boiled, dried and then sliced."

Naree Mahadilok, owner of the 77-year-old Chiang Mai restaurant Khao Soi Lamduan Faham, says that her mother-in-law, the shop's founder, "learned to make khao soi from a Chin Ho, who used rice noodles cut by hand and colored (them) with turmeric." It was her mother-in-law, says Ms. Mahadilok, who substituted egg noodles for rice and added curry paste to the broth to appeal to the northern Thai penchant for highly spiced food.

As for the coconut milk, "its use in Thai cuisine is related to court cuisine in Bangkok," says Busarin Lerchavalitsakul, a graduate student at Chiang Mai University who researched khao soi for her master's thesis.

The main customers at Lamduan Faham when it first opened "were officials from Bangkok assigned to work in Chiang Mai," Ms. Busarin says. She speculates that Lamduan added coconut milk to its khao soi to please its most important patrons, and other purveyors followed suit.

THE SETTING

Though khao soi is available in Chiang Mai at almost any hour of the day, "it's really lunchtime or afternoon food," says Ms. Petsophonsakul, the Chiang Mai native. It's easy to whip up a batch at home, but specialist shops do it best. "We don't like to eat khao soi in big restaurants," she says.

THE JUDGMENT

Much of the dish's success depends on its broth, which should be neither too spicy, too sweet nor too thick. "I don't want to taste too much chili paste or curry powder," says Ms. Petsophonsakul. According to Lamduan's Ms. Mahadilok, balance is key: "If you add too much coconut milk you get bland khao soi, but if not enough it's too spicy."

Ms. Petsophonsakul prefers the meat be cooked in the soup, to absorb its flavor. Boiled noodles should be soft and elastic, and those garnishing the dish shatteringly crisp.

Accompaniments are no mere afterthought either. "Without nam prik paow, my meal of khao soi will not be delicious at all," Ms. Busarin says. For Ms. Mahadilok, the pickled cabbage should be sour enough to counter the soup's coconut sweetness.

"In the end, the important thing is everything," decrees Khao Soi Islam's Ms. Lertpunwilai, "because if there's just one taste lacking it's not khao soi."

THE SOURCE

Though it's not run by a Chin Ho, **Khao Soi Lamduan Faham** (352/22 Thanon Charoenrat; ☎ 66-53-243-519: 90 U.S. cents to $1.05) is Chiang Mai's khao soi grande dame. Its broth is a perfect balance of sweet and heat. Choose between chicken and pork; the latter is over-the-top delicious.

Suthasinee (3/3 Thanon Charoenprathet Soi 12; ☎ 66-53-273-152; 90 U.S. cents to $1.20) serves an exceptional beef khao soi boasting a not-too-sweet, meaty broth with hints of star anise and unusually tender slices of beef and handmade noodles.

Khao Soi Islam (22-24 Thanon Charoenprathet Soi 1; ☎ 66-53-271-484; 90 U.S. cents) serves chicken or beef khao soi, each with deliciously eggy, linguine-like noodles and a broth light on coconut milk. The nam prik paow here is a Yunnan/Sichuan-style incendiary concoction of ground roasted chilies and salt in oil.

Robyn Eckhardt is a writer based in Kuala Lumpur.

A bit of *spice* from *Chile*

Take the Carmenere challenge

By Dorothy J. Gaiter and John Brecher

Rick Lew for The Wall Street Journal

We generally plan our columns pretty far in advance because it takes time to find the wines, conduct the tastings and research the questions we raise as we sip. From time to time, though, we taste a wine and we get so excited that we want to drop everything and write about it. We feel like Kevin McCarthy in "Invasion of the Body Snatchers": "Listen to me! Please listen!"

It all began at Hattie's, a cute little Southern-style restaurant in Saratoga Springs, New York. Hattie's is better known for its fried chicken than its short wine list, but it carries some attractive choices. In the past, we had ordered a Carmenere from Chile there and it worked well, and since there was a new one on the list, we decided to check it out.

Carmenere has an interesting history. It was big in Bordeaux in the 19th century, but was largely wiped out by disease. The same grape thrived in Chile, however, and for a long time the vines there were thought to be Merlot. It was only about a decade ago that Chilean officials realized the mistake and recognized Carmenere for the distinct—and distinctive—grape that it is. However, because of its unusual history, there are attendant complexities. For instance, it is pronounced in various ways, but the official Wines of Chile organization says it prefers car-men-NAIR. And then there is the accent. As Wines of Chile puts it, the original French spelling was "Carmenere," but the industry standard became "Carmenère," which is neither French nor Spanish; now the thinking is to simplify it back to the original.

The wine on the list at Hattie's was the 2007 Cono Sur, at $28. We took a sip and liked it. It was round and easy, with ripe, black-fruit tastes. Very pleasant. But over the course of the next hour, as the wine got air and warmed, an amazing thing happened. It got tighter, far more herbal, with intense smells and tastes of black pepper and green bell pepper—which melded perfectly with fried chicken, chicken livers, collard greens and succotash.

To us, this simple bottle was a triumph: Even though inexpensive, it remained true to its varietal even as it provided a top layer of friendly fruit that anyone could like. It was a wine with serious character that novices could enjoy and experts could talk about. And, we guessed, cheap. In fact, when we checked later, we found Cono Sur costs about $9.

While we have been writing about Carmenere since 2002—the first that made us sit up and take notice was from Luis Felipe Edwards—we had never conducted a broad blind tasting because there haven't been enough of them on shelves. But today Carmeneres are far more widely available, and far more labels are on shelves, than ever before. Plantings of Carmenere in Chile rose about six-fold between 1998 and 2007. It now accounts for almost 10% of Chile's total wine production.

We bought every Carmenere we saw from the 2007 and 2008 vintages to find out if our Cono Sur experience was an aberration. We tasted them in blind flights over several nights.

Considering our initial excitement, we wish we could tell you to rush right out and buy the first Carmenere you see and you'll have a winner, but, unfortunately, it's not that simple. Carmenere is slightly challenging, with not-so-easy-to-cozy-up-to tastes of black pepper and herbal green bell pepper that are quite unusual, and it has a very dark color and a medium body. In our tasting, we found that, too often, winemakers had decided that the character of Carmenere might indeed be too challenging and, as a result, they clobbered their wine with wood. Too many of the wines were heavy with oaky, sweetwood, vanilla tastes that obscured the essential character of the grape and left it a fairly generic red. Many, in fact, could easily have passed for forgettable, inexpensive Merlots—not terrible, but boring and lead-footed.

The best of the wines, however, showed what a shame this development is. Our best of tasting, Terra Andina "Reserva," was at once noteworthy and highly drinkable, and seemed so warming that we thought of roast meats and fireplaces. It's a lot of wine for $11.99. The U.S. importer says the winery makes about 45,000 cases.

By the way, Cono Sur, this time the 2008, did well in our blind tasting, too, and, for $8.99, it's a great value. The importer says the winery made 30,000 cases. And here's an interesting postscript: While the wines we tasted, including our favorites, generally had seen quite a bit of oak, the Cono Sur never touched oak. It was just pure, ripe, marvelous fruit (including 10% Cabernet Sauvignon). Bravo! We feel Carmenere is at a critical point. Are winemakers going to retain its distinctiveness or make it into a pedestrian red? We'd guess the next few years will be important.

Meantime, although it's a little bit of a risk, the prices are so reasonable and the payoff potentially so good that we'd urge you to try one, especially if you have a wine merchant whom you trust to point you toward the wines with real spice. And if you can have it with fried chicken and greens, all the better.

WSJ.com

▶ To see details on our favorite Carmeneres, click on **Asia.WSJ.com**.

Arbitrage

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City	Currency	US$
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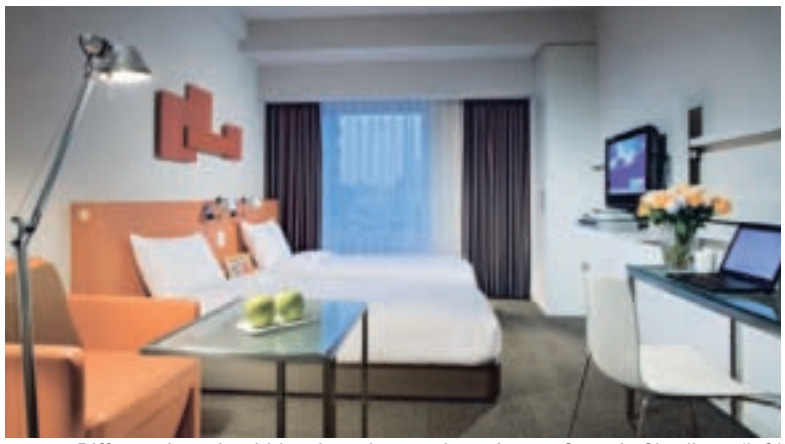
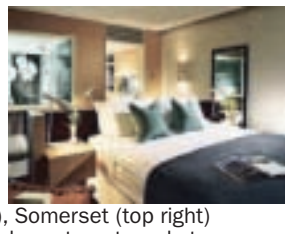
Special Advertising Section

Value and intuitive service are key to industry success

By **Joseph Dobrian**





Ascott Group Ltd.

Different brands-within-a-brand — such as Ascott Group's Citadines (left), Somerset (top right) and Ascott (bottom right) — cater to distinct segments of Asia's serviced apartment market.

IMPROVED services and accommodation, rather than company-wide promotions, are driving the serviced apartment industry today, according to its top executives. This is particularly true in Asian markets, where demand has stayed high and rate erosion has been slight. Serviced apartments are still a relatively little-known alternative to hotels, but as they become more versatile their popularity continues to grow.

Like many hotel operators, serviced apartment companies often provide a good-better-best progression of product. The different brands-within-a-brand often cater separately to the lone traveler, the family and the top executive. Chris Ahearn, senior vice president of corporate sales and marketing for Los Angeles-based Oakwood Worldwide, says that the trick to serviced apartments is making the guest feel at home.

"We've worked hard throughout Asia to give our apartments a very Western feel," he reports, "and to offer different price points for a variety of solutions. We want to help our clients keep travel budgets down, and we pay attention to two crucial factors: location and uniformity of service. You get the same quality at any Oakwood — and we're very easy to do business with."That's a must, especially in countries where doing business is often full of impediments, he says. "There's so much hassle in your day when you're traveling internationally, so we make sure our people are well versed in English and can provide good service."

Oakwood does not feel the need to offer brand-wide or region-wide promotions at this point, says Mr. Ahearn, but it does offer discounts or promotions to certain clients in certain markets as necessary. "Sometimes we target top buyers with complimentary upgrades, and we may offer other incentives and even organize tours or special events for a large group of people, but we mainly focus on service," he says.

The economy is not as far down in Asia as in North America and Europe, so the serviced apartment business is not as negatively impacted in the region, he says.

Serviced apartments are far less impacted by an economic downturn than hotels, agrees Lim Ming Yan, CEO of Singapore-based Ascott Group Ltd. He has launched a number of special promotions this year to celebrate Ascott's 25th anniversary, including monthly lucky draws for short-stay guests, with prizes including free stays for 25 years, and various rate discounts including a 25% off best-available rate offer.

"We offer three brands — Ascott, Somerset and Citadines — that cater to distinct segments of the market," he explains. "Our flagship Ascott-branded properties are premier serviced residences that offer residents discreet service in an exclusive environment. Our Somerset residences have more children-friendly facilities such as playgrounds, indoor playrooms and children's swimming pools. Our Citadines serviced residences are urban residences in prime city locations for independent travelers who want high-quality accommodation at good value.

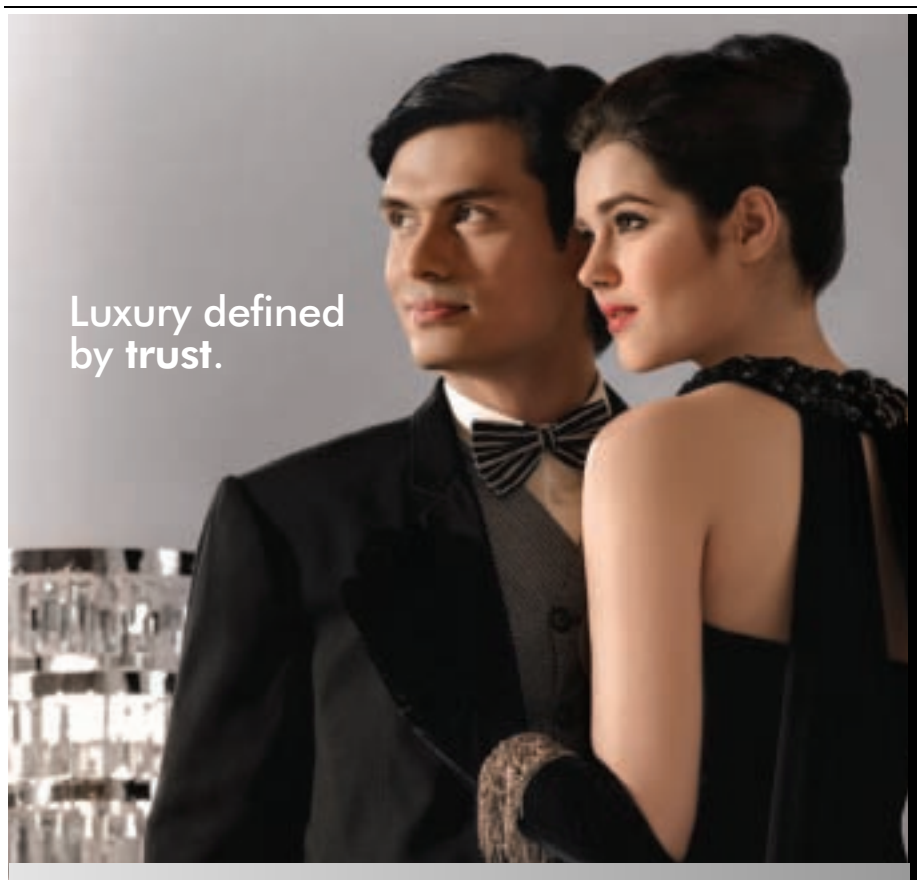
"Our clients, in deciding whether to stay with us, apply the same criteria as they would when choosing a home. Value and cost-effectiveness, along with space and a functional layout, are important factors. The property should be located near their offices, and near international schools."

Staying "relevant to the guest" is the secret of success for serviced apartments, says Choe Peng Sum, CEO of Frasers Hospitality Pte. Ltd. in Singapore.

"We have no overt reward system, but we're rigorous with our guest history and we stay alert to our regular guests' needs and idiosyncrasies. Our network also allows us to cross-sell special rates if our guests want a shopping trip to Paris or a spa escapade to Bangkok. While there is a certain pressure on rates [rates have fallen as much as 15% in some locations], the demand for serviced residences is growing exponentially — as evidenced by our occupancy rates — and we are planning our expansion to take advantage of that growth [particularly in India and China]." Across Frasers' properties, occupancy rates are between 75% and 90%, with Europe, Shanghai, Hanoi and Singapore maintaining the highest rates.

What does the typical serviced apartment guest require?

"Intuitive service, a good breakfast, a good gym/spa and stringent security," says Mr. Choe. "A shuttle service is necessary for some markets, but not critical to others. Hardware — room size, amenities and so on — are important, but service makes the difference."



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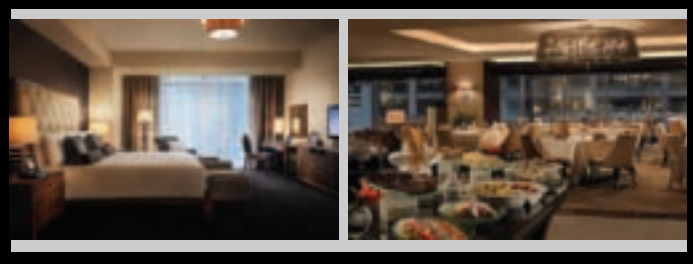

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Special Advertising Section

China and India are key markets for an expanding industry

By **Joseph Dobrian**

DESPITE the recent world-wide economic downturn — and in some ways because of it — the serviced apartment industry is set for expansion throughout Asia.

Lim Ming Yan, CEO of Singapore-based The Ascott Group Ltd., says that his operation consists of 19,000 existing units, with 6,000 more under development. Among recent developments is the growth of Ascott's Citadines line of "apart'hotels," a European serviced apartment brand that Ascott acquired in 2004 and brought to Asia.

"Citadines apartments appeal to travelers who want value," he explains. "They provide more space and a high level of flexibility, as guests can choose from a menu of services according to their lifestyles and pay only for the services they need. We've opened 10 Citadines properties in Asia-Pacific over the past few years, and we'll open nine more there by 2011." Locations in which Citadines apartments are due to open include: Jakarta, opening 2010; and Kyoto, opening the same year.

A growing portfolio

Ascott has a portfolio of about 5,000 serviced residence units in 25 properties across 12 cities in China, with six more slated to open by 2011. Ascott residences are due to open in Shanghai next year, and Shenzhen in 2011. China will remain a key engine for Ascott's growth, says Mr. Lim.

Vietnam, too, is an important market. "Vietnam's high literacy rate, relatively economical cost of labor, and stable government will continue to attract foreign direct investment," Mr. Lim predicts. "We recently clinched a management contract to operate a serviced residence in Haiphong, the third-largest city in Vietnam. This will expand our presence beyond Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City."

Ascott is also expanding into Central Asia. Aktau, Kazakhstan, will see its first Citadines property open in 2010. "We're also working towards opening our first property in Chennai, India, next year," says Mr. Lim.

Choe Peng Sum, CEO of Singapore-based Frasers Hospitality Pte. Ltd., sees China and India as the keys to his company's growth in Asia-Pacific — and he hopes to target more leisure travelers.

"Leisure travelers make up a growing percentage of our business," says Mr. Choe. "We attribute this to our central locations, near cultural destinations as well as business districts. With our recent signing of a 212-apartment property in Shanghai, we've become the largest serviced residence operator in that city."

With this signing, Frasers will operate 18 properties in China, with 4,171 apartments in nine major cities, such as Beijing, Hong Kong and Shenzhen. In India, the company has signed agreements for six properties that should be fully operational by 2013 — three in Bangalore, two in New Delhi, and one in Chennai. In December it plans to open its first property in Malaysia: the 216-apartment Fraser Place Kuala Lumpur.

Frasers Hospitality

Frasers' new Modena brand aims to cater for young professionals.

Frasers will continue to upgrade its gold standard [five star] residences, Mr. Choe adds, and will grow its second brand, Modena. The first Modena property will open in Tianjin, China, in January.

Modena caters for "the young professional who spends the majority of his or her time on the road, whose business and leisure hours have merged into one, creating the need for a type of serviced residences that specifically focuses on their lifestyle needs," he explains. This focus includes leisure facilities, and the "soak suite" — private hot tubs for guests to relax in that will be available in most of the properties.

Chris Ahearn, senior vice president of corporate sales and marketing for Los Angeles-based Oakwood Worldwide, says that serviced apartment companies have to grow their marketing power as well as their physical presence. Oakwood has 22 operating properties in Asia, in locations such as China, India, the Philippines and Thailand, with 24 scheduled to open by 2013, with its greatest growth in China and India. Oakwood properties under development are in locations such as: Shanghai, scheduled to open 2010; Hyderabad, India, scheduled to open 2011; and Johor Bahru, Malaysia, scheduled to open 2013.

Pent-up demand

"China is really hungry for serviced apartments and overall lodging," says Mr. Ahearn. "Our clients are constantly wondering where we'll be next, and there's pent-up demand in second-tier cities across China. [Other primary cities, like] Shenzhen and Guangzhou are hungry for accommodations. In India, we're in Bangalore and Mumbai, and our two properties in Pune are full and very vibrant now. People don't often think of Pune but there's lots of opportunity there.

"Our industry doesn't have the advertising budget that big hotels have, so getting our product recognized is a challenge. It's an unknown niche, which, once discovered, is used regularly. Unlike North America and Europe, where the buying function is more centralized, in Asia it's more fragmented and there's rarely a single point of contact to which to sell our product. You have to call on the prospect's travel, human resources, marketing, engineering and finance departments. You have to educate the whole company on the service offering and the brand."

A final chapter

The treasure found on the late author's computer

Associated Press

By Alexandra Alter

When Michael Crichton died suddenly of cancer last year, his publisher and agent had no idea that he'd finished another novel, an old-fashioned adventure tale about pirates in 17th-century Jamaica.

Out this month in hardcover and paperback, "Pirate Latitudes" seems at first like a major shift for Mr. Crichton, best known for his science and technology-themed novels such as "Jurassic Park" and "Sphere." It features a rakish but honor-bound privateer named Charles Hunter who sets out to raid a treasure-laden Spanish galleon (and who, like his creator, attended Harvard). Mr. Crichton's publisher is pitching the book as a throwback to the author's 1975 historical romp "The Great Train Robbery."

News Corp.'s HarperCollins imprint is hoping for another blockbuster from Mr. Crichton, whose books have sold 150 million copies. It's printing 900,000 copies of "Pirate Latitudes" in the U.S. News Corp. also owns The Wall Street Journal.

The book, in presales, has been holding steady on Amazon's best-seller list for the past month, and Steven Spielberg has bought film rights.

After the author's death, his assistant discovered "Pirate Latitudes" as a complete manuscript in Mr. Crichton's computer files, along with an unfinished thriller. The novelist, a fastidious researcher, left behind a style guide to accompany the pirate book with correct spellings and terminology, said Jennifer Barth, who edited the book.

"Michael was extremely secretive when he worked," said Lynn Nesbit, Mr. Crichton's agent for 40 years. "We never knew what he was working on until he turned it in." Ms. Nesbit added that Mr. Crichton worked on several computers and may have left other unfinished works. "We're still sorting through it all," she said. HarperCollins plans to hire a writer to finish the thriller.

The widespread cultural fascination with pirates, which helped turn the "Pirates of the Caribbean" movies into a multibillion-dollar franchise, may drive readers to the book. Pirate historian and author Richard Zacks said pirate enthusiasts are "hungry for anything that's a cut above," adding: "There are so many bad romances, with Fabio on the quarterdeck."

Mr. Zacks—who read the book's opening chapters, which HarperCollins posted online—said that he was impressed by Mr. Crichton's attention to historical details and by his nuanced distinction between pirates and privateers (pirates operate illegally and keep 100% of the spoils, whereas privateers are government-sponsored and split the bounty with the state funding the expedition).

He quibbled with the book's cover, which features a skull and crossbones. "Pirate Latitudes" is set in 1665; the ubiquitous pirate symbol didn't appear before 1700, he said. But he largely forgave the anachronism: Mr. Zacks's own "The Pirate Hunter," about the 17th-century privateer Captain Kidd, has a huge skull and crossbones on its cover.

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Bookshelf / *By Alexander Theroux*

A Nasty Way With Words

Portly G.K. Chesterton once remarked to the exiguous George Bernard Shaw: "To look at you, anyone would think there was a famine in England." To which Shaw replied: "To look at you, anyone would think you caused it."

"Poisoned Pens" is a delightfully malicious compilation of literary invective across the centuries, registering the less than kind views of one author for another. We always knew that the profession of writing was as cut-throat as any other. Now we can see little authorial daggers doing their malicious work.

Poisoned Pens
Edited by Gary Dexter
(Frances Lincoln, 240 pages, $16.95)

The effects is oddly pleasurable. Feelings of envy, anger, condescension, contempt and irritation are universal, of course, but writers have a way of expressing such feelings with unusual style and, at times, with astonishing accuracy—when they are not being merely rude, petty and childish.

George Meredith, a novelist who prided himself on his prose refinement, knocked his contemporary Charles Dickens for being the "incarnation of cockneydom." Virginia Woolf felt that the poet T.S. Eliot was too religious: "He seems to me to be petrifying into a priest." Her complaint about Katherine Mansfield was less elegant. One might wish, she wrote in a letter, "that one's first impression of K.M. was not that she stinks like a—well, civet cat that had taken to street walking."

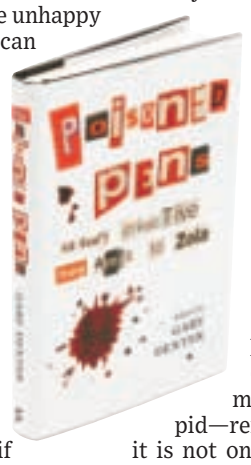
A monstrous snob, Vladimir Nabokov criticized Fyodor Dostoevsky for his "lack of taste." H. Rider Haggard, the author of "King Solomon's Mines," denounced Anthony Trollope (whom he met in South Africa) for being "obstinate as a pig" and filled with "peculiar ideas."

Henry Miller, famous for such louche classics as "Tropic of Cancer," mocked George Orwell for his high-mindedness. Aristotle attacked Euripides (for being too modern). Ben Jonson sniped at Shakespeare (for plagiarism). Alexander Pope skewered Colley Cibber (for excruciatingly bad poetry); Cibber, for his part, called Pope a "dwarf" and ridiculed his translations of Homer. The milk of human kindness does not seem to be an innate writerly trait, and charity is scant.

One wonders what role similarity plays. William Faulkner, who clearly borrowed from Mark Twain the idea of giving the "tall tale" a literary spin, called Twain "a hack writer who would not have been considered fourth rate in Europe, who tricked out a few of the old proven 'sure fire' literary skeletons with sufficient local color to intrigue the superficial and the lazy." Not that Twain himself was kind. "Every time I read 'Pride and Prejudice,' I want to dig her up and hit her over the skull with her own shin-bone," he wrote of Jane Austen.

Some put-downs have a lapidary quality. "I am reading Proust for the first time," Evelyn Waugh wrote in a letter. "Very poor stuff. I think he was mentally defective." Clive James said of contemporary romance-novelist Judith Krantz: "To be a really lousy writer takes energy," adding: "As a work of art [her novel "Princess Daisy"] has the same status as a long conversation between two not very bright drunks."

Authorial contempt is democratic and need not depend on category differences. Women writers, for instance, easily dislike each other. Ayn Rand lost no time running down Isabel Paterson, a libertarian like herself: "I enjoyed talking to her, but thought nothing of her writing." Edith Sitwell said of Virginia Woolf: "I consider her 'a beautiful little knitter.' "Mary McCarthy famously excoriated Lillian Hellman, who she considered "tremendously overrated, a bad writer, and dishonest writer." (Hellman filed a lawsuit that ended only with her death.) "His work is evil," Anatole France wrote of his countryman Emile Zola. "He is one of those unhappy beings of whom one can say that it would be better had he not been born."



The canonized masters can be as every bit as catty as anyone else, but perhaps that is not such a bad thing. In his introduction to "Poisoned Pens," Gary Dexter notes, truthfully, that the splenetic is a truer barometer of thought than the gushy or the kind. "What is negative is, if nothing else, generally sincere," he writes. "Good reports of fellow writers can easily be flattery or log-rolling: just think of the ways book-reviewers operate. It is only in the negative and the scabrous that we can be sure of a writer's true feelings."

Spite makes for better show business, too. Edmund Gosse once observed of the 18th-century critic John Dennis that his "acute, learned and sympathetic treatises" were long forgotten, though he was indeed known for not perceiving the genius of Pope. Likewise, Gosse said, no one paid any heed to the "grace and discrimination" of the critic Francis Jeffrey, who would go down in history as the ill-tempered man who attacked the Romantic poets, including Wordsworth. Jeffrey's shrewd judgments "weigh like a feather" beside "one tasteless sneer at Charles Lamb."

The insults taxonomized in "Poisoned Pens" take the form of lengthy denunciations, one-line waspish barbs and sheer bitchery. Entire paragraphs of truly memorable spite, such as Mark Twain on James Fenimore Cooper or D.H. Lawrence on Aldous Huxley—or harangues like E.M. Forster's lengthy evisceration of Sir Walter Scott—are far more effective than mere angry quips and brief nastiness.

One can't help recalling, in this context, the only serious line delivered in the movie comedy "Animal House." The English professor (Donald Sutherland) makes a sour—and stupid—remark to his class that it is not only boring but indeed pointless to study the poetry of John Milton.

Still, hatred alone is what lasts, Mr. Dexter suggests. Reasonlessness in the matter of assault is not to be avoided—it positively helps.

Many venomous attacks are thus ad hominem, in the physical sense. Bertrand Russell mocked Alfred Lord Tennyson for having "an almost theatrically pink complexion and two red spots on his cheeks." Charles Baudelaire called George Sand "stupid, heavy and garrulous." Algernon Swinburne's cruel description of Ralph Waldo Emerson: "A foul mouth is so ill matched with a white beard." Thomas Carlyle thought that Samuel Coleridge lacked will ("he has no resolution") but chose to focus on his homeliness: "Figure a fat flabby incurvated personage, at once short, rotund and relaxed, with a watery mouth, a snuffy nose, a pair of strange brown timid yet earnest looking eyes, a high tapering brow, and a great bush of grey hair—you will have some faint idea of Coleridge." Samuel Butler was no less cruel: "Yes it was good of God to let Carlyle and Mrs. Carlyle marry one another and so make only two people miserable instead of four." In our own time, Martin Amis, after a literary dinner in London, recounted how Salman Rushdie failed to respond to one of his points: "No answer; only the extreme hooded-eye treatment." He looked, Mr. Amis wrote, "like a falcon staring through a Venetian blind."

For sheer schadenfreude "Poisoned Pens" is a book that one can pick up and put down anywhere. There are some notable gaps in the collection. We see nothing of H.L. Mencken. (The focus is mainly British.) Neither is mention made of Baron Corvo, one of literature's most contumacious practitioners, a man who lived to dish and to vilify. Nor are we are treated to anything from the late Truman Capote—"That's not writing," so went his famous remark on Jack Kerouac, "that's typing"—who could have taken up a whole chapter by himself.

The nastiness is amazing. Do buy copies of "Poisoned Pens" for your curmudgeonly friends. It is a perfect Christmas book for those seeking to stem the glut of good will.

Mr. Theroux's latest novel is "Laura Warholic: Or, The Sexual Intellectual" (Fantagraphics).

If Odysseus Had GPS

By Daniel Akst

When Robinson Crusoe was stranded on a tropical island he did pretty well for himself, all things considered. But to the rest of the world he was as good as dead. Daniel Defoe's novel, masquerading as a memoir, came out in 1719, a time when voyages were dangerous and people could easily be lost to one another with no way to get in touch or even determine if the other party was living. Indeed, when Crusoe finally gets back home he finds himself disinherited by a father who had assumed, sensibly enough, that his son was deceased.

Today, of course, Crusoe's dad would probably just check his son's Facebook page—unless Crusoe had used his iPhone to send his GPS coordinates to his various Twitter followers. After all, these days what is known as Robinson Crusoe Island, off the coast of Chile, has Internet access.

What a momentous change. For most of human history, losing contact with a loved one was all too easy, especially when great distances intervened. Leave-takings must have been particularly fraught when one might not get word of a loved one for months, years—or ever. Laura Linney, as Abigail Adams, brought to vivid life the heartache of an 18th-century parting when John Adams left for Europe in the TV miniseries. In Crusoe's day, in fact, most people didn't even have pictures of one another to hang onto.

> In older literature, it wasn't just paradise that was lost.

It's no wonder that variations on the long-lost theme have been a literary staple practically since the dawn of narrative. In "The Odyssey," Penelope weaves her way through years without word from her wily husband, Odysseus, who finds himself waylaid by a Cyclops here and a minor goddess there for the better part of a decade. Fast forward to the 20th century and the same issue is at the center of Chaim Grade's novel "The Agunah" (published in English in 1974); unable to prove that her husband really was killed in World War I, the uncertain widow of the title risks bigamy in the eyes of Jewish law by marrying another man.

Remote islands figure in a lot of these stories. In Tennyson's heart-rending "Enoch Arden," the title character is a stranded seafarer; his wife, Annie, is blessed with the love of another but haunted by uncertainty over her husband's fate. Hollywood brought a predictably lighter touch to the tale in "My Favorite Wife" (1940), in which Nick Arden (Cary Grant) is astonished to discover that his long-lost wife Ellen (Irene Dunne) is alive and well after seven years on a remote island with an acrobatic stud played by Randolph Scott. She turns up back home on the very day Nick marries someone else.

Odysseus, Crusoe, the various Ardens—so many characters in movies and books wash up on these far-flung flyspecks that it's a wonder they don't run into one another. Had Crusoe lived long enough, he might have encountered the whole "Gilligan's Island" crew, the FedEx guy from "Cast Away," or all those sweaty desperadoes on the TV series "Lost."

The journeys of yore were not always taken voluntarily, either. In Thomas Hardy's "The Mayor of Casterbridge," the moody protagonist Henchard "sells" his wife and baby one day in a fit of drunken pique. Hating himself in the morning, he sets out to recover his family—but despite an extensive search, it's hopeless.

Like so many venerable plot devices, the tradition of the lost loved one has been rendered pretty well obsolete by digital communications technologies—and thank God for them. Think back to the aftermath of World War II, when millions of displaced persons in Europe struggled to find lost loved ones. Some searched for decades. Under similar circumstances today, the displaced would probably consult a searchable database on the World Wide Web, or perhaps set up a Google alert to notify them when a relative's name cropped up.

Literature's loss, it seems, is humanity's gain. Not a bad trade, I think.

Mr. Akst is a writer in New York's Hudson Valley.

time off

by William Westbrook

Bangkok

EXHIBITION

Twist and Shout: With "Zero Nendai," as the present decade is known in Japan, nearing an end, 17 artists consider the ambiguous nature of Japanese youth culture—withdrawn vs. interactive—through works that use popular images and expressions to confront issues in Japanese society. It may mean fresh career opportunities for Pokémon and Hello Kitty.

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Hong Kong

CONCERT

Haydn Weekend: The Hong Kong Sinfonietta and guest conductor John Forster roll out two completely different programs in the space of 24 hours. The two are unified by the presence of Haydn: Dec. 12, his first cello concerto (with the 26-year-old Korean Han-Na Chang as soloist); Dec. 13, a variety pack that closes with his final symphony, No. 104.

City Hall Concert Hall, 5 Edinburgh Place, Central; Dec. 12, 8 p.m. and Dec. 13, 3 p.m.
Admission: HK$120 to HK$380 (Dec. 12); HK$100 to HK$220 (Dec. 13).
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SPORTS

East Asian Games: Athletes from China, North Korea, South Korea, Japan, Macau, Mongolia, Taiwan, Guam and Hong Kong gather for an event that outdoes the Olympics by including cue sports (among them both snooker and pool), "DanceSport" (waltz, rumba and beyond) and bowling. The opening ceremony takes place Dec. 5, three days after competition starts.

21 venues, Dec. 2 to 13, various times.
Admission: HK$50 to HK$300 (opening ceremony, HK$1,000; closing ceremony, HK$200 to HK$600).
☎852-2810-6352
Web: www.2009eastasiangames.hk

Macau

EXHIBITION

Glories of the Dawn: From the National Art Museum of China, a hundred works that cover the latest 60 years of the country's 430-year oil-painting history (the form arrived with a icon-bearing Jesuit missionary in 1579).

Macao Museum of Art, Macao Cultural Centre, Ave. Xian Xing Hai, Nape; to Feb. 21, 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., closed Mondays.
Admission: Five patacas.
☎853-8791-9814
Web: www.artmuseum.gov.mo

Singapore

EXHIBITION

Thrice Upon A Time: The epic story of the Philippines and its people as told by its artists, both grand masters and contemporary figures. The exhibition, which includes a rarely seen painting by national hero Jose Rizal, explores ideas about representation, authenticity and identity.

Clockwise from right, Tour: Lisa Ono takes her bossa nova sound around China and Japan; Tour: Pianist Hélène Grimaud plays Bach and Liszt in Beijing, Shanghai and Seoul; Singapore: 'España y Filipinas,' by Juan Luna, from the exhibition 'Thrice Upon A Time.'

MS Entertainment (Ono); Mat Hennek (Grimaud); Lopez Museum Collection ('Espana'); East Asian Games (Ko); Dirk Pauwels/Deweer gallery, Otegem, Belgium ('Brain')

Singapore Art Museum, 71 Bras Basah Rd.; to Jan. 31, 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., to 9 p.m. Fridays.
Admission: S$8.
65-6332-3222
Web: www.singart.com

Tokyo

CONCERT

The Mariinsky Orchestra: The magnetic conductor Valery Gergiev, perhaps the busiest man in classical music and almost certainly the only one ever to conduct with a toothpick, brings his home orchestra in from St. Petersburg for a tour devoted to Russian composers. The 28th it's

From left, Tokyo: 'Ik Men Mijn Eigen Brein II' (I Drive My Own Brain II), by Jan Fabre; Hong Kong: Local hero Ko Lai Chak will be one of the competitors in the East Asian Games.

Mussorgsky, the 29th Tchaikovsky, Dec. 1 Shostakovich and Dec. 2 Stravinsky.
Suntory Music Hall, Akasaka 1-13-1, Minato-ku; Nov. 28, Dec. 1 and 2, 7 p.m.; Nov. 29, 2 p.m.
Admission: 7,000 yen to 20,000 yen (Nov. 28, Dec. 1 and 2); 9,000 yen to 22,000 yen (Nov. 29).
☎ 81-3-3584-9999
Web: www.suntory.co.jp/suntoryhall

EXHIBITION
Medicine and Art: Two ways of looking at the human body—the scientific and the artistic—with pride of place for Leonardo da Vinci, who left not only stunningly accurate anatomical drawings but also "Mona Lisa." Works range from anatomical drawings (by Michelangelo as well as Leonardo) to contemporary art by Francis Bacon and Matsui Fuyukot.
Mori Museum of Art, 53/F, Roppongi Hills Mori Tower, 6-10-1 Roppongi, Minato-ku; Nov. 28 to Feb. 28, 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., to 5 p.m. on Tuesdays
Admission: 1,500 yen.
☎ 81-3-5777-8600
Web: www.mori.art.museum

Tour: Asia

CONCERT
Lisa Ono: Japan's best-known bossa nova performer has what may be an unfair advantage, having lived in Brazil until the age of 10. The singer and guitarist is able to give a bossa nova beat both to John Denver's "Take Me Home, Country Roads"—the words "West Virginia" have never sounded stranger—and Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On." This tour also will take her to Guangzhou, Kobe and Sapporo.
Shenzhen: Shenzhen Concert Hall, 2016 Fuzhong 1st Rd., Futian District; Nov. 27, 8 p.m.
Admission: 180 yuan to 1,280 yuan.
☎ 86-755-8284-1888
Web: www.shenzhenconcerthall.com
Beijing: Beijing Exhibition Theater, 135 Xizhimenwai St., Xicheng District; Dec. 5, 7:30 p.m.
Admission: 180 yuan to 1,280 yuan.
☎ 86-400-707-9999
Web: www.ticketmaster.cn
Tokyo: Bunkamura Orchard Hall, 24-1 Dogenzaka 2-chome, Shibuya-ku; Dec. 27, 5 p.m.
Admission: 7,350 yen.
☎ 81-3-3498-9999
Web: www.bunkamura.co.jp

CONCERT
Hélène Grimaud: The slightly built pianist, noted for her muscular though lyrical approach, will show off her range in these concerts with a program of Bach works originally written for the harpsichord, Bach works for strings transcribed for piano by Busoni, Rachmaninoff and Liszt, and Liszt's own sonata in B minor.
Beijing: National Centre for the Performing Arts, 2 Chang An Jie, Xichen District; Dec. 9, 7:30 p.m.
Admission: 120 yuan to 880 yuan.
☎ 86-10-6417-7845
Web: www.piao.com.cn
Shanghai: Shanghai Grand Theatre-Lyric Theatre, 300 Renmin Da Dao, Huangpu District; Dec. 11, 7:15 p.m.
Admission: 150 yuan to 800 yuan.
☎ 86-21-6217-2426
Web: www.culture.sh.cn
Seoul: Seoul Arts Center, 700 Seocho-dong, Seocho-gu; Dec. 13, 8 p.m.
Admission: 30,000 won to 80,000 won.
☎ 82-2-582-1301
Web: www.sac.or.kr

CONCERT
Soweto Gospel Choir: Out of the townships of South Africa and into the big time, this 26-member ensemble has picked up two Grammy awards and one Oscar nomination in the past three years with a mix of African gospel, Negro spirituals, reggae and American popular music. (One of its Grammy-winning albums features both a Bob Dylan song and a version of Bob Marley's "One Love" sung with U2's Bono.)
Tokyo: Tiara Koto, 2-28-36 Sumiyoshi, Koto-ku; Dec. 11, 7 p.m.
Admission: 6,800 yen.
☎ 81-3-5624-3333
Web: www.kcf.or.jp/tiara
Singapore: Esplanade Concert Hall, 1 Esplanade Drive; Dec. 22 and 23, 7:30 p.m.
Admission: S$38 to S$168.
☎ 65-6348-5555
Web: www.sistic.com

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Ladies in distress

The LPGA goes global on an uncertain course

Sports Illustrated/Getty Images (Wie); Getty Images (Shin)

Michelle Wie, who became a millionaire golf superstar without winning an LPGA tournament until this month, is the very model of a modern multilingual marketing juggernaut.

Golf Journal
JOHN PAUL NEWPORT

Richmond, Texas

The two most striking things about the 2010 Ladies PGA Tour schedule of events announced Nov. 18 are their diminished number, and how few are on U.S. shores.

The overall number of tournaments is 24, down from 27 this year and 34 two years ago. Beyond that: In 2008, there were 24 LPGA events played in the U.S. Next year...13.

"Changes have hit the Tour so fast, even a lot of the players haven't caught up with it yet," said Heather Daly-Donofrio, a Tour veteran who now works as LPGA player liaison.

The truth is that no one knows exactly where the LPGA Tour is headed. That includes the new commissioner, Michael Whan, who officially takes over Jan. 4 and was introduced to the troops Nov. 17, in advance of the season-ending Tour Championship here in suburban Houston.

He promised the players he'd spend the next few months listening and learning, then take action—potentially transformative action. "If that means leaping off a cliff, everyone will understand why and we'll leap off the cliff together," he told me.

Almost certainly the future will involve significant international expansion. As much as some U.S. fans may hate to hear it, and as much as the term is corporate boilerplate, "global" is the Tour's greatest strategic strength.

Mr. Whan, 44 years old, brings a sports-business background (TaylorMade-Adidas Golf, Mission Itech Hockey, Wilson Golf) and marketing cred (Crest toothpaste) to the job. He will need all of that and more. The Tour, with revenue this year of about $60 million, must surely rank among the world's most complex small-to-midsize businesses. It exists primarily to benefit the players, but they range from millionaire superstars like Lorena Ochoa and Michelle Wie to the journeyman pros below about 90th place on the money list, who don't earn enough in prize money to cover expenses.

Tournaments have multiple constituencies: the entities that own them (including sports agencies such as International Management Group and the LPGA itself), the title sponsors (most on short-term contracts) and the community organizations that in many cases run events to benefit local charities. More than half its players are non-Americans, from 27 countries, including 47 from South Korea.

The drop in U.S. events is due primarily to bad timing and the recession. Former Commissioner Carolyn Bivens, forced out by a player revolt in July, tactically allowed many sponsorships to expire this year in anticipation of a new television contract for 2010. She hoped that would enhance the Tour's bargaining power. The LPGA did strike a 10-year deal with the Golf Channel in February, but by then numerous sponsors were too battered by the economy to stick around. Four of the 31 tournaments initially scheduled for this year had to be canceled.

I had a chance last week to talk with more than a dozen LPGA members, and all of them—even the international players—were eager to see more events in the U.S. "At least 75% should be here," said Katherine Hull of Australia. The logistics of staging most events in one country are important to players, but so, too, are the glamour and excitement of the American arena. "When you're a girl, this is where you dream about coming to play," said Anna Rawson, also of Australia.

Star rookie Jiyai Shin of South Korea, told me she likes playing in the U.S. more than in her homeland. "The tournaments here are higher quality, and you can compete against the best in the world," she said. And it's not as if her performances go unnoticed back home. Korean television is the Tour's single biggest source of revenue. In fact, overall, LPGA broadcasts are available in 50% more homes internationally than in the U.S., according to Peter Smith of IMG, who oversees the LPGA's television sales to 133 countries.

As the U.S. economy recovers, it seems likely that the 17 open weeks on the schedule between February and November will fill in with mostly American tournaments. Among golf hot spots without scheduled events next year are Arizona, Texas, Florida and the entire Southeast. That's an aberration, not a trend.

Even so, the biggest growth potential is overseas. Gail Graham, president of the LPGA Tournament Owners Association, said that several potential U.S. companies are more interested in sponsoring LPGA events in Asia than in the U.S. One of those might be General Electric, according to Ms. Daly-Donofrio. "That's where the clients are that GE wants to cultivate," she said.

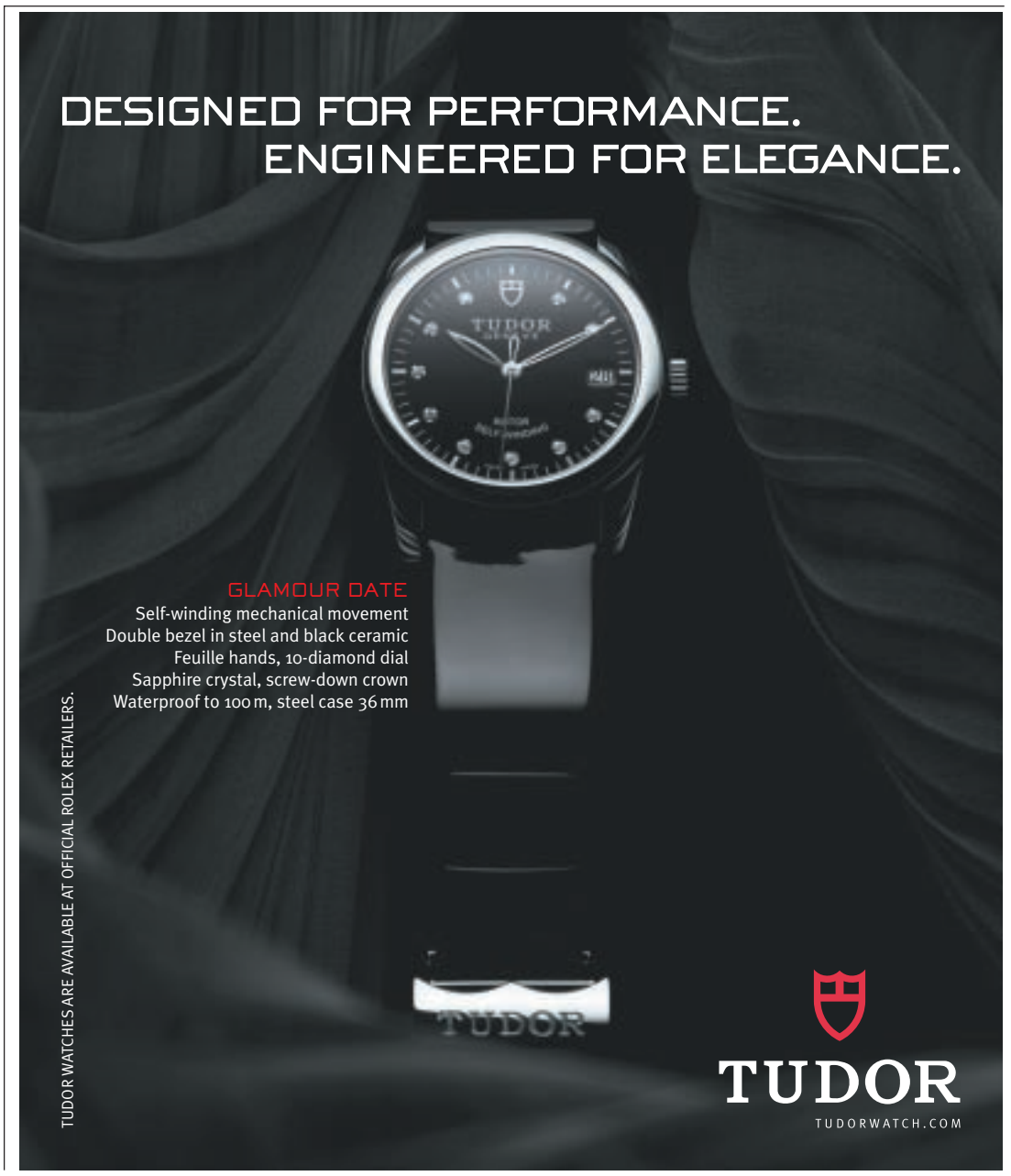
The top stars are also keen about global. "My sponsors are international—look," said Paula Creamer, pointing to the Royal Bank of Scotland logo on her sleeve. The top players sometimes get appearance fees in non-LPGA events and can claim spots in more elite foreign tournaments.

"I love playing anywhere I can around the world," said Michelle Wie, who had won her first LPGA event the previous week in Mexico. Immediately after our conversation, she conducted a television interview in fluent Korean and then another partially in Japanese, which she is studying at Stanford. I am almost as awed by her potential as a global marketing juggernaut as I am by her ability to hit 300-yard drives.

The LPGA's future is far from guaranteed. Ron Sirak of Golf World magazine last week explored the possibility of a strategic merger with the PGA Tour and the danger that a smaller, new tour could emerge to steal away the top players with guaranteed big-money paydays.

But Mr. Whan has tall ambitions, too: "The women who founded this Tour 60 years ago took a big gamble and created something great for the generations that followed. So we're looking to pay it forward, to make this tour even bigger and greater for the 12-year-old girls who are standing on a tee somewhere today, anywhere in the world, and dreaming. The business opportunities for us to do that are out there."

Rookie star Jiyai Shin of South Korea says she prefers playing in the U.S.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